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1 Clarence Lane

BOUND TO WIN

A TALE OF THE TURF.

BY HAWLEY SMART,

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"COURTSHIP IN 1720, 1860;" ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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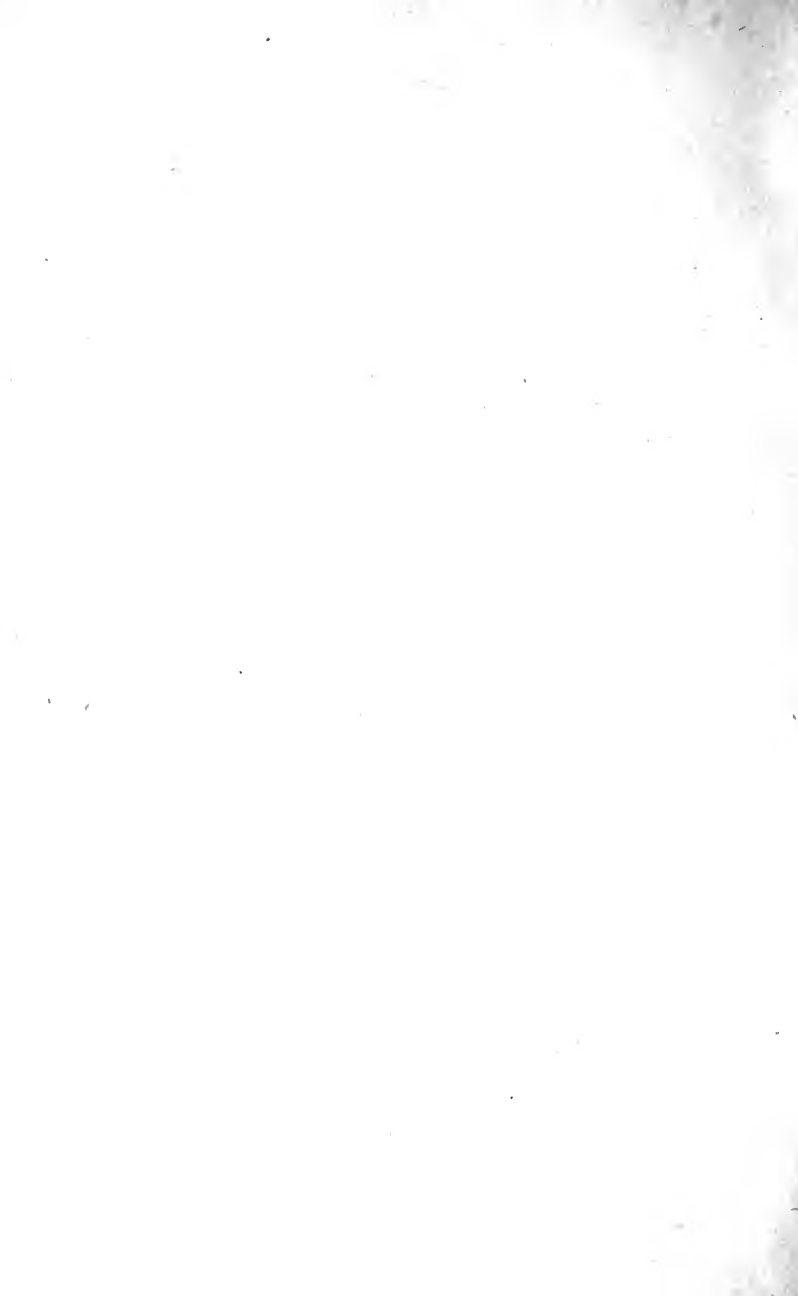
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BOUND TO WIN.



CHAPTER I.

AN INTERESTING SITUATION.

IT is the closing day of the closing year, and the lights of Liddington twinkle merrily out into the murk of the winter's evening. The village is all alive to-night, although it is considerably past what are deemed canonical hours; for, as a rule, Liddington is in bed betimes, only holding high revel and listening to the chimes at midnight on certain festivals. But Liddington is conservative of old usages, and adheres to divers customs that have died

out in most parts of the country—the waits, the mummers, etc., all make their appearance at Christmas time. Carols are sung under the windows of the well-to-do by the children of their poorer neighbours, and there is distribution of coals and Christmas beef at both the Grange and the rectory. Liddington, of course, always welcomed the incoming year with all the honours. The ringers are all ready in the belfry, waiting for the first stroke of twelve to send forth a merry peal of salutation to the new year. In the bar of the King's Head buxom Mrs. Hamper, the landlady, is busy compounding a mighty bowl of punch, in which the magnates of the village may wish each other health and prosperity for the ensuing twelvemonth. More humble Liddington is imitating its betters in pints of ale in hostelries of far less pretensions, for the King's Head is the only house of entertainment in Liddington that aspires to the dignity of an

inn, although there are sundry beershops much affected by that portion of the labouring population, whose exertions are usually of a somewhat fitful nature, more especially during the shooting season, when hares and pheasants command good prices.

“Might I suggest caution with the sugar, Mrs. Hamper,” remarked a plump little man with beady black eyes, and whose nether limbs were encased in Bedford cords and butcher boots. “Too much saccharine is fatal to the figure as the punch—it conduceth to gout and obesity. Spare the sugar, Mrs. Hamper, an you have regard for your health and proportions.”

“Come, doctor, if I’m a bit plumper than when John there took me for better or worse, eighteen years ago, it’s no more than a married woman ought to be, and, for the mixing of punch, I’ll turn my back on never a man in all Bloomshire.”

“Nobody more willing to testify to your skill in such compounding than myself,” replied the doctor urbanely.

“And nobody able to give more trustworthy evidence, Slocombe,” chuckled a wizened rat-faced man, who appeared to be doing badly upon whatever he might have conceived it his mission to be doing in this world. He was the attorney of the district, and had to lament that the neighbourhood was not more litigious.

“No, the doctor’s tried the missus’s brew for a goodish few years now,” interposed a burly, heavy-jowled man, who was smoking a long clay pipe by the side of the fire. “They allays differs a bit about the lemons.”

“Never mind, John,” cried Mrs. Hamper, laughing, as she shredded some lemon peel into the fragrant bowl. “I’ve noticed, whatever fault the doctor may find while the brewing goes on, I never hear him say nought when it comes to the drinking.”

“Good—he, he! very good!” chuckled Mr. Larcher, the attorney. “We have got young Mr. Luxmoore back again at the Grange, I see, Mrs. Hamper; the first time he’s been down since his uncle’s death, I think?”

“Yes; he’s never been at Liddington since the old squire went off and left him the property,” replied the landlady. “He’s a fine young fellow, though, and was rare free-handed, both of his money and his neck, as a lad.”

“That he was, especially of the latter,” ejaculated Dr. Slocombe; “and how the poor old squire did love to see him ride!”

There was no keener sportsman through the whole country-side than the doctor; and whether it was a turn with the hounds, a little cross country affair, a coursing match, or the decision of the blue ribbon for the year, Dr. Slocombe always managed to be there.

"He's bound by will to keep up the stud, ain't he?" inquired John Hamper.

"Yes, and a good job too," replied the doctor enthusiastically. "It would have been a cruel pity to have seen such a lot of brood mares scattered by auction as the old squire got together. Poor old man! he was a fine sportsman, though he never achieved the aim of his life."

"And that was——?" inquired Mr. Larcher, who had but lately settled in these parts.

"The winning of the Derby. I do believe it ought to have come off one year. You remember Plutus, John, and what a good colt he was? Well, there was never any accounting for the way the bookmakers laid against him after he won the Two Thousand. Just when he ought to have become a stronger favourite than ever, when the horse was doing as well as a horse could, he went steadily back in the betting."

“He never had any luck while he trained with that Godfrey,” said Mr. Hamper, sententiously ; “leastways, if you recollect, Mr. Slocombe, the squire’s horses never did win when they were expected to.”

“No,” said the little doctor, musingly ; “I remember Plutus started for the Guineas that year at a longish price. Godfrey declared, too, he was fit to run for his life when he started at Epsom.”

“Mr. Godfrey is that celebrated trainer, I think, of whom I once heard it remarked,” observed the attorney, “that he *would* have money. Other trainers, my informant remarked parenthetically, *want* money, but Godfrey *will* have it. He does not train for the present, Mr. Luxmoore, does he ?”

“Oh no. The old squire had his suspicions of Godfrey, I fancy ; any way, they parted a year or two after Plutus, and then came Darlington, the present man.”

“And what do you think of him, doctor?” inquired John Hamper. “I never seed him myself, but he don’t seem to make much out of what Calvert sends him——”

“Yes; but then Calvert—that’s the stud manager here, you know, Mr. Larcher—told me the other day that they had been very unlucky of late in their young ones. He didn’t think they had ever sent Darlington a real good one yet. It is so at times, you know—a first-rate stable dependant on its own breeding stud, seems to lose form altogether for two or three seasons, and never to have anything fit to win a big race in the collection; then the luck turns, and they have a handful of trumps again.”

“But you were saying that Harold Luxmoore is bound by will to keep up the stud,” remarked Mr. Larcher, as he lit a somewhat attenuated and mildewed cheroot; “how’s that?”

“Well, you see, to win the Derby had been the dream of poor Oliver Luxmoore’s life. He tried for forty years unsuccessfully, as many another turfite has besides, but he died, if beaten, unconvinced. He said to me in his last illness, ‘I shall never live to see it now, but it’s there in the paddocks all the same, doctor—those brood mares of mine must throw double sixes at last amongst them. I won’t give in, though I am going. Harold will just have to stick at it till it comes off.’ I thought it was a case of the ruling passion strong to the last, but, by Jove! sir, when his will came to be looked at, it was found that Harold’s inheritance of the property was conditional upon his devoting a certain amount per annum to the breeding and running of race-horses until he should win the Derby, after which, I believe, he may do as he likes.”

“But supposing he never does?”

“Well, I don’t quite know what would

happen after his death, but in the event of his failing to comply with the conditions of the will during his life, he forfeits all, bar a thousand a year, and the property goes to a certain Berkley Holt, who, as poor Oliver Luxmoore used to say, would take care to win it somehow, when he found it so much to his advantage. A bad lot, Mr. Larcher, from the little I know of him."

"Hem! what we call just a little unscrupulous," said the attorney.

"What I should call a damned black-guard," growled John Hamper.

"A mean, cowardly scoundrel," retorted Mrs. Hamper, as she gave a final stir to the punch.

"Ah, he committed himself somehow in these parts," said the attorney insidiously.

"We haven't quite forgot poor Lizzie Dixon, and how he treated her," said John Hamper, knocking the ashes out of his pipe with such unnecessary violence that

the long clay was shivered to pieces in the process.

The doctor pursed up his lips in resolute silence, and just then the merry bells rang out in cheerful welcome of the new year, and Nancy Hamper, ladling out the punch, called out, "Hush, John, let the sorrowful story lie dead. Come, gentlemen, lets drink a happy new year and luck to the young squire and the Liddington Grange horses."

The toast was drunk with enthusiasm by certainly three of the quartette. Loyal upholders of the Luxmoores were the doctor and the Hampers. For over a quarter of a century had the sporting medico drenched and bolused the Grange household and been on friendly terms with its owners, while John Hamper, like his father before him, held the inn and the farm attached to it under the same. As for Nancy, she had been still-maid at the Grange till her bright eyes and rosy

cheeks captivated John Hamper ; and though the old folks thought at the time John might have done better, they were disabused of that idea before they died, and John himself adhered firmly to his original conviction, that his buxom, bustling helpmate was the best wife in England, or thereabouts.

The attorney, as a new comer, could perhaps be hardly expected to feel as the others did about the Luxmoores. He was, moreover, of the cold-blooded order of humanity, and, as John Hamper had once gravely observed, "his liquor seemed to do him no good, he never warmed up." Professional caution it might be, or a general mistrust of letting his fellows see too clearly into the windows of his soul. Liddington, indeed, was a little puzzled about Mr. Larcher ; it didn't take to him, although it had nothing to urge against him ; clever in his profession, no doubt, as he had shown when opportunity offered,

and affecting a geniality which somehow had scarcely a genuine ring in it, than which nothing is more likely to excite misgivings.

Up at the Grange, too, Harold Luxmoore and his shooting companions have heralded in the new year royally. A capital day amongst the home covers has been followed by a lively pool, an excellent dinner, and a tremendous onslaught on poor Uncle Oliver's undeniable claret. Coffee and the customary *chasse* accomplished, the gay party betook themselves to the smoking-room, in pursuit of whist and tobacco; but the host wears a somewhat preoccupied air, and seems to keep his eye more on the clock than the card-table, the result of which is a roughing of his partner's "best," and sundry other misdemeanours of like nature, which must have made Sarah Battle shudder in her grave.

"Confound it, Harold, you're out of all

form to-night," cried Cyril Herrick. "If you'd only returned me trumps I should have brought in my diamonds, and we couldn't have lost the trick; as it is, it's all up."

"Beg pardon for my carelessness, old fellow, but I was thinking of something else," pleaded the accused.

"Fellow shouldn't think of anything else when he's playing whist," drawled the Honble. Jim Laceby, a younger son of the Earl of Mountgayters, "and then he'd best think all he knows. Two by honours and the trick—game; that's a treble, single, and the rub. Eleven sovereigns, Herrick, and seven before makes eighteen."

"All right; I've done. It's no use playing with a partner who is woolgathering. What the deuce makes you so keen about bed, Harold? You're not generally so cruel anxious to get to your pillow."

"He shot straight enough to-day, too,

and showed no symptoms of tiring," chimed in the fourth of the party, a stout, florid gentleman, whose portentous appetite and general ponderosity excited the utmost amazement in the Honble. Jim.

"Quite right; he couldn't have taken to thinking of extraneous matters then, Mr. Blackden. He was wonderfully awake when that last cock rose, wasn't he? Just a shade too quick for the pair of us," replied Laceby blandly.

"What's the row, Harold?" inquired Cyril Herrick, a sworn intimate of his host.

"Pooh! nothing much," retorted Luxmoore with a laugh; "but you know all about my poor uncle's absurd will?"

"Of course we all know you're bound to win the Derby, and hope to Heavens we shall be all well on when the time comes," cried Cyril, laughing.

"Well, I've a sort of superstition that the great chance of my life is coming to-night."

"D—n it, he's off his head," remarked the Honble. Jim. "We don't run Derbys in mid-winter. What can New Year's night have to do with Epsom Downs?" and Mr. Laceby, ejecting a cloud of tobacco smoke, raised his eyeglass, and paused for a reply.

"Calvert came up to see me just before dinner, and told me Veturia was getting very close upon her trouble. Now she's, I think, the best mare we've got. Volscian, by Marauder out of Veturia, was perhaps as good a horse as we ever bred at Liddington."

"Nonsense; you forget Plutus," interrupted the stout gentleman indignantly.

"Not at all, Blackden; but you know old Millionaire—his dam is dead, so there's no chance for us there."

"True, very true; I forgot that, and Volscian was a good horse. Well, we hope Veturia will drop the winner of the Derby to-night. Still, I don't see why

you should look so serious because one of your brood mares is near her time."

"Why, confound it, Blackden, you pretend to know something about racing, and can't see that," cried Luxmoore, springing to his feet. "Why, this, man, is the thirty-first of December, and don't you understand that if it should be dropped before midnight it will be a very late foal of last year, instead of a very early one of this—be, in point of fact, just a year behind all its fellows in point of age, and useless for racing purposes. Naturally, I am anxious. Calvert is to send up word directly it arrives, and I'm on tenter-hooks for fear of hearing before midnight."

"Only a quarter of an hour now," said Herrick, glancing at the clock.

Jim Laceby puffed silently at his cigar for a few seconds. No cooler man existed than the Honble. Jim—nor harder. He could walk all day after grouse, play whist all night, and come down looking serene

as if he had been put to bed with the children. He would ride a four-year-old at an oxe in the middle of a quick thing, or stand a cracker on the favourite with equal placidity. Nobody ever heard the Honble. Jim exult much or grieve much over anything: he took the world pretty well as it came, and made the most of it. He sometimes languidly murmured in the shibboleth he affected, that "he had got it hot," "come to grief," "had a rosy time," or something of that sort, but his equality of temperament never seemed disturbed, and yet, according to his lights, Jim Laceby was no fool. What he did he did well. He neither betted, rode, nor played foolishly, and was no novice in the abstruse science of backing and laying.

"Tell you what," he exclaimed, after a short pause, "of course you'll want to back this little brute; now's your time for a long shot, Luxmoore. Here's a thousand to ten about it for Epsom. You can have it five times if you like."

"No, my dear fellow, not till I hear that Veturia has not misconducted herself, and presented her offspring to the world too early."

"Pooh! I'll give you that in," replied Laceby. "Put it this way, if you choose; here's five thousand to fifty the winner of the Derby is not foaled at Liddington Grange on January the first of the coming year."

"You can put that down," replied Luxmoore, curtly.

"And if you choose you may book the same to me," said Herrick.

"All right; but let us be quite clear," replied Laceby. "It's long odds, as long as I can afford to lay, though I'm bound to tell you, I think they ought to be still longer. Remember, I am not responsible if Calvert is wrong in his opinion. If Veturia puts off foaling to the second of the month, of course you're hit."

"By Jove! I never thought of that,"

laughed Luxmoore; "but I don't think Calvert likely to be that much out. You gave me over twelve; let the bet stand in your own terms, eh, Herrick?"

"Certainly; I am satisfied," replied the latter.

"There's a lovely beginning of a ten thousand pound book," soliloquized the Honble. Jim. "An unborn and unnamed one already laid against. Do you know, you two are most remarkable men. I've known many a horse backed, and freely too, as we all have, when he has been to every intent and purpose dead for that race, but I never knew one backed before he was alive before."

"Never mind," laughed Luxmoore — "the time may come when you'll wish he'd never breathed."

Jim Laceby shrugged his shoulders. It was useless to argue with men who believed in unborn colts and treble events. "By the way," he continued, pencilling in

his betting book, "have you any idea what you mean to call him? Not that it affects our wager, but I do believe in a good name. It is odd, but a good horse usually carries a good name. When you christen a horse anything like Yellow Jack he's bound to never quite win."

"Ten minutes to one!" exclaimed Mr. Blackden, rising. "I'm off to bed. I fancy you're all right now, Luxmoore."

As he lit his candle the door opened, and a servant entered.

"Note from Mr. Calvert, sir," he said; "one of the lads brought it, and waits to know if there is any answer."

"None," replied Harold, as he threw his eye over the note. "All right. The Liddington Grange Derby winner entered the world half an hour ago. What do I mean to call him, Laceby? I'll tell you. Fill up your glasses and drink his health."

"I don't mind," said the Honble. Jim,

"though, with ten thousand against him, you can't expect me to wish him well through his teething, at all events."

"You shall be told time enough to get out, if it is necessary," cried Harold Luxmoore, laughing as he raised a beaker of soda and brandy in his hand. "Here's my toast—Gentlemen, luck and sound legs to Coriolanus, by Velocipede out of Veturia, by Verulam."

The toast was drunk with much enthusiasm by all. The Honble. Jim wished his host luck really with all his heart, and without the slightest apprehension. None knew better than he how seldom the long odds were landed, or how rarely the backing of the zero at roulette gave satisfaction. "It's a far cry to Lochow," saith the Campbell, but it is further still to the winning post at Epsom, is a maxim well known to those who make yearling Derby books.

CHAPTER II.

THE BEND SINISTER.

LIDDINGTON Grange was a pretty picture for a landscape painter that New Year's morning. I am speaking, of course, of a time when the chill January sun was about as much up as it was likely to be, and not of that birth of the twelvemonth which the graceless revellers of yesterday eve had so gaily welcomed both at Grange and King's Head. The old ivy-clad Elizabethan gables stood out clear and sharp, the laurels still spangled with last night's mist, which had just a crackle of frost in it. The grand old trees in the park, stripped to their extreme nakedness,

had nothing but their bold boles, knotted branches, and deserted rooks' nests to display, it is true, but they looked imposing for all that, and conveyed an idea of what they must be in all the majesty of their summer beauty. The garden, and a positive hamlet of glass laid behind the house, shut in, again, in their turn, by a small wood of some twenty acres or so. To the left, at something like a third of a mile distance, were a somewhat elaborate set of farm buildings, having in their rear a lot of small enclosures, varying from four to eight acres each, but principally of the former size, surrounded in all cases by stone walls about seven or eight feet high, and having severally a well-thatched, open shed in their respective corners. These are the celebrated Liddington Grange paddocks, from whence many a colt, whose name was afterwards famous in Turf history, has emerged. In one of the smaller of these enclosures, a slight

muscular man, habited in neat single-breasted coat of Oxford mixture, light cream-coloured scarf, secured by the smallest of gold pins, and dark grey trousers that are marvellously cut to fit over the boot, is contemplating a mare busily engaged in licking a newly-born foal. He twists the ash plant he carries in his hand mechanically as he looks at the foal, then, putting it under his arm, takes a note-book once more from his pocket, and mutters, "Yes, that's the worst of it. You ain't a bad-looking foal by any manner of means, but, d—mme, your grandmother can't show her marriage certificate. I wonder whether you are a clean bred 'un or no? There's your mother—she's by Tramp; but who the deuce was her mother?—that's the rub. She must have been as near clean bred as can be, any way, but it's a terrible pity we don't know her history. The poor old squire, he bought this mare just before he

died, because she was such a good-shaped one ; but he never found out how she was bred, quite. It is awkward, because, my little fellow, if you grow up promising, we shan't know how to describe you in the *Calendar*."

A particularly clean-shaved man this, with a shrewd, keen, steely blue eye, and looking like one who lived a regular and abstemious life, rejoicing in early hours and country air—as, in verity, Mr. Calvert did. He had managed the home farm and Liddington Breeding Stud for the last quarter of a century, and in knowledge of horseflesh and all its ailments, in knowledge of sheep, cattle, or the nice conduct of a grazing farm, Mr. Calvert was hard to beat. Whether it were the treatment of distemper, a strained sinew, or a hay crop in a wet time, it were difficult to find a man more equal to the occasion than the Liddington stud-master. He entered heart and soul into this breeding of

thoroughbred stock ; rarely bet, and then in the most modest manner, but took the greatest interest in following the career of his *protégés*. He lived in a state of chronic irritation with the trainer, whoever he might be—Godfrey, Darlington, it was all one. He was furious when his pets came to grief, as is the lot of so many race horses when called upon to stand the ordeal of the training ground. “ Their legs, wind, and tempers are all fairly right when they leave me,” he was wont to murmur, “ or else I shouldn’t send them ; but I’m always getting them back with an intimation they’ve fallen through on one of those points. Temper, by Jove ! I hardly know what a bad-tempered one is ; they are all quiet if properly handled, but Darlington sends them back so wild and scary—I can’t make it out.”

Mr. Calvert, in fact, never could be brought to understand how the hard, stern, discipline of training tries either men or

horses. His favourites left him handled with loving care from their birth, and he could not believe that mere corn and hard work could make them turn fractious. That it is so we all know. Take that most tricky piece of horseflesh—the pony—with moderate feeding and fair work, he is a useful, honest animal; double his corn and slacken his labours, and the pony-chaise becomes available for the match trade only at no distant date. Mr. Calvert, indeed, had never quite got over that Plutus disappointment to which Dr. Slocombe had alluded. It was as much the hope of his life to send the Derby winner from Liddington Grange as it had been the old squire's. Mr. Calvert had his own opinions concerning Plutus's running at Epsom, but was far too discreet to promulgate them; still, when Oliver Luxmoore made up his mind to dispense with Mr. Godfrey's services, Mr. Calvert exerted none of such influence as he

undoubtedly possessed over the old squire in favour of his retention. If there was one thing troubled the stud-groom—I should say manager, in alluding to a man of Mr. Calvert's weight in the world—it was his inability to understand his coadjutor Darlington. Calvert was a first-rate judge of a horse; now, whether the appraising of horseflesh indoctrinates a man in the lore of Lavater or no, is a curious psychological problem; but practically there is no doubt, that those cunning in horseflesh are tolerably good hands at summing up humanity also. Mr. Darlington, however, was, so far, an unread book as concerned Calvert. Of course they met but seldom; when they did the trainer was chatty, affable, and agreeable, but the stud-groom was forced to confess, that after he had handed his yearlings over to their schoolmaster, and enjoyed an excellent dinner, and a chat over bygone Turf doings, he had never yet carried away one particle

of opinion, so to be called, concerning his own charges. Mr. Darlington never condescended to commit himself further than to allow there was "a useful one or two among them," and Calvert was fain to admit that he had unfortunately as yet not supplied the trainer with anything much to speak of in the way of material.

"We've begun well this year," muttered Calvert, "and it'll be odd if I don't take them up a niceish string of young ones to Blithedown at the back 'end. It's main odd Mr. Harold hasn't been down before now to look at the Veturia foal. He was terrible anxious about her dropping it too soon yesterday, I know, and so was I. She's the best mare we have, I reckon, and the Velocipede cross ought to be a success. Ha! here they come, I see," and the stud-groom strolled forward to meet his young master, who, accompanied by his guests, was now seen approaching.

"Good morning, Calvert. Here we are,

all agog to view last night's phenomenon, the prospective winner of the Derby. He was backed to win ten thousand before he breathed, I give you my word."

"Too early, sir, too early. Time enough to back him later on, when we get some idea of what he's likely to turn out," replied Calvert, as he led the way to the paddock, in the shed of which Veturia and her aristocratic offspring were at present domiciled.

"There he is," exclaimed Luxmoore, as the door of the shed was thrown back, and the old mare, with her ears laid back, confronted them with some appearance of hostility. "Don't go too close, as the old lady is apt to be a little awkward on these interesting occasions. She believes a deal in her progeny, whatever any one else may do. What do you think of Coriolanus, Jim?"

"Think, my dear fellow," replied Laceby, "it's no use thinking about babies. You may look at 'em for a month, and you can't guess whether they'll turn out good or

good looking. It's only women bother their heads and inflame their imaginations about 'em. The little beggar's alive, and I've laid ten thousand against him—looks likely to keep alive, and, therefore, I should like to see him in about a twelve-month. I'll tell you what I think of him then, Harold."

"It was you laid the money, Mr. Laceby, then," remarked Calvert, with a slight touch of his hat.

"Of course I did," replied the Honble. Jim, placidly. "Dev'lish good laying, too, as I told 'em. Ten thousand against the winner of the Derby being born at Liddington Grange on New Year's Day."

Mr. Calvert indulged in a low laugh, as he said, quietly, "You've laid against a lot, sir."

"Don't mean to say she's had a litter?" replied Laceby, jerking his head in the direction of the high bred Veturia.

"Not exactly," replied the stud-groom.

"We had another foal dropped last night, though, or rather, this morning, sir," he continued, turning to his master. "That old Tramp mare has got a fine colt foal."

"By Jove! you've got rather the best of me," remarked the Honble. Jim. "I never thought of your falling in for a second string."

"Oh, but this doesn't count, of course," replied Harold Luxmoore, quietly.

"I should think it does," interposed Herrick, "though I don't want to insist upon it."

"Count!" replied Laceby, "naturally it counts—if young Coriolanus there had been stillborn, or deformed, that would have been one to me. If you've the luck to have two or ten foals born in the specified time, that's so many points to you. Let's go and see t'other little chap; perhaps he's not quite so healthy-looking as this one, Calvert—eh?"

"He looks likely to do well at present,

Mr. Laceby," replied the stud-groom, laughing; "but, as you say, beyond that the babies are well formed and healthy, we can't tell anything at present."

"That's a good-shaped mare!" said the Honble. Jim, with quite an accession of interest for him, as, after a stroll of two or three hundred yards, they entered a somewhat inferior paddock in which the unfortunate mother with the bar sinister resided. "Good lean varmint head—rather ragged hips, and hocks wonderfully well let down—not showy, but of a sort that always go. What is she?"

"Well, that's just what we don't quite know. Uncle Oliver picked her up about two years ago, and she's not quite thoroughbred, we fancy. She's by Tramp, but we don't know what her dam was," replied Harold.

"Like her better than Veturia," replied Jim Laceby, sententiously. "Pity she's not clean bred. I suppose you never had anything of hers before?"

“No; she was unlucky with the only foal she’s had since she’s been here—it died. But you don’t mean to say you like her better than Veturia?”

Mr. Calvert pricked up his ears to hear what Jim Laceby would say. Mr. Calvert was in the habit of listening to criticism on his pets from the guests at the Grange that secretly caused him considerable amusement. If you stayed at Liddington it was *de rigueur* to ask to go round the paddocks; and “what some of ’em do admire,” Mr. Calvert was wont to remark, “was extraordinary. The ladies, bless ’em, seem to have a love for legs and tails, and the young gentlemen to think a tandem leader is a Derby horse.”

But Mr. Calvert was quite aware that Jim Laceby knew a horse when he saw it, and it rather puzzled him that the Honble. should prefer the half-bred mare—for half-bred only they must be termed, however slight the stain, of which the

pedigree is not to be traced—to Veturia, the pride of the Liddington Paddocks, and as handsome a specimen of a brood mare as was to be seen in all England.

“Well, I do,” replied Laceby, puffing meditatively at his cigar. “I like the wear and tear look of her ; and if you could but get at it, depend upon it there’s mighty little stain in her pedigree. T’other’s what I call too good-looking. It’s a rum thing, but the best horses, like the best and cleverest women or men, are never too good-looking. No, Herrick, I don’t want to argue, and I can’t explain ; I only give you the result of my experience.”

That Jim Laceby was a man of many experiences nobody could deny. He was one of those who had lived every day of his life, and what his age might be at the present moment was not to be arrived at without reference to the peerage. He might be anything from thirty to five and forty, and in reality held something

like a just mean between those two epochs.

"I can't quite agree with you, Mr. Laceby," said Calvert, quietly. "I like to breed from as good-looking mares and sires as we can lay our hands on ; but I do think you're right, sir, about this Tramp mare. She's not what we call a gaudy one ; still, no one who knows a horse but must admit she's good points. Tramp, too, was a rare stout one. She's staying blood in her veins."

"Well, I don't think much of her myself, and if it hadn't been for Uncle Oliver's eccentric stipulation, I shouldn't enter her progeny for Epsom. As it is, of course, I stick them all in, if they're doing well when the time of entry comes round."

"What are you going to call him?" inquired Herrick. "I don't affect to be a judge, but he looks to me a nice foal."

"By Jove! yes. Of course the little beggar will want a name. Suggest one. He's by Spendthrift out of a Tramp mare."

"Can't call him anything better," observed Laceby, laconically.

"Than what?" inquired Luxmoore.

"What you did call him," retorted Jim, "only I'd lengthen it a little. Say Beggarman, and I'd pronounce him well named."

"Capital!" said Herrick. "Beggarman, by Spendthrift out of a Tramp mare, that will read most appropriate in the *Calendar*, eh, Calvert?"

"Neat, sir, neat," replied the stud-groom,

"Well, my fly must be about round," said Laceby, looking at his watch; "and if I'm to catch the train, it's getting about time. I must stroll back to the house. Don't let me take you, Luxmoore."

"Nonsense; we'll walk back, and see the last of you. I suppose it is useless to press you to stay longer?"

"Can't, old fellow. You've given me three rattling days' shooting, and the claret's a liquor full of sunny memories. It's a great blessing, and a thing to be

recollected with perfect piety, the succeeding a man who leaves his cellar and stables so unexceptionably filled as your poor uncle has, Harold. It reconciles me to my lot as a younger son, when I reflect that it will fall to Spankhurst, my elder brother, to drink the governor's wines, and to ride what he calls his hunters. Good-bye, Calvert."

"Good-bye, sir. Hope we shall see you down again in the autumn to have another look at our New Year's Day colts."

Jim Laceby nodded, and, accompanied by Herrick and his host, walked quietly back to the house. A fly, with his portmanteau on the top, stood at the door, and his servant was waiting with his overcoat by its side.

"Time up, William?" inquired the Honble.

"We're drawing it rather fine, sir," replied the valet, who, thanks to his

imperturbable master, had missed as many trains as any man in England.

"Well, good-bye, Herrick, good-bye, Harold. Suppose I'm to say everything that's pretty for you at Laxton? Anything special for Mrs. Richeton?—she's safe to be there, you know," said Laceby, as he stepped into the fly. "After the way you flirted with her last season, I shall have to improvise a tender message if you won't entrust me with one."

"No, you needn't do that," replied Luxmoore, curtly. "I don't fancy she'll inquire much about me."

Jim Laceby glanced keenly for a moment at his host, then nodded gaily, bade the driver "look sharp," and was immediately rolling down the avenue at the best pace his posters could accomplish.

"Hum!" he mused, as he threw himself back in the fly, "suppose Luxmoore and *la belle* Richeton have had an explosion of some sort. I hope, for his sake, it has

been a tolerably peaceful rupture, because I've an idea Theodora Richeton would be a somewhat dangerous woman to quarrel with. I don't know why I should think so, but I do. If she deemed herself aggrieved I could imagine her never resting till she had obtained what she considered a quittance in full. Harold Luxmoore certainly appeared very *épris* of her all last season. It sometimes struck me she had made up her mind to be mistress of Liddington Grange, and if she did, and he gave her tolerable grounds to believe that she would be, he's not done with Theo. Richeton yet, if I know any thing about her. If he looks like being in earnest about any one else for some little time, I should advise Harold to be on his guard. Mrs. Richeton's a woman of some determination, in spite of her soft, purring manner, or she never could have kept such a brute as Richeton in decent order. Her married life couldn't have had

much of the rose-leaf about it; but that fellow would have made any woman's existence unbearable if she'd ever been afraid of him. A drunken bully always does, unless the woman's nerve beats him, either in high life or low; and to the last Tom Richeton never dared fairly face his wife when it came to a row royal. To make things more complicated than ever, too, I've a suspicion she's really fond of Harold. By Jove!" he murmured, piously, "what a blessing one's salad days are over, and one's done with love-making. A bad Derby book's not half so bad to get out of as a serious flirtation."

CHAPTER III.

THE LAYTONS OF LAXBY.

JIM LACEBY is leading a life *sui generis*. Scores of men like himself throw up hunting for a bit after Christmas, in order, at the same time, to give their friends' pheasants a last benefit, and their horses a slight rest. They wander from one big country house to another, and enact, in short, the *rôle* of the minstrel of centuries gone by. They carry the last tale, the last romaunt with them ; and although, as we read—

“The way was long, the wind was cold,
The minstrel was infirm and old”—

that old gentleman had a tolerable lot of scandal to tell when he did his tale unfold.

His modern successors find the way by no means long, thanks to railroads; nor cold, thanks to ulsters and foot-warmers; but they have no whit deteriorated in the bearing of the chronicles scandalous, and we all know with what avidity the Honble. Mrs. B's and Lord C's goings on at Grassmore are discussed at Avondale, even in this rigidly decorous generation. Jim Laceby arrived at Laxton like the troubadour it was presumed, laden with the romaunts of the country-side.

Laxton was a right pleasant country house of moderate calibre, and when one has said that about it, I don't know that there is really much more to be said concerning it. It is disgracefully modern, and amazingly comfortable. It is remarkable for nothing; it has not even the faintest tradition of a ghost. How should it? Twenty years ago or so Laxton was merely a well-timbered grass country when Richard Layton, a thriving city merchant,

bought the estate and built a good house on it. He might have ordered a ghost, one would think, from the Herald's College, as he did his arms, for to have status and honourable position a country house should always have a phantasma attached to the premises: it is a certificate of age, like colour to a meerschaum pipe—a badge of aristocratic and country connection always improperly overlooked by the *nouveaux riches*. A family ghost is quite as imperative as family arms, and equally easy of creation.

But if it was not remarkable for legend, park, or picture-gallery, there were sybarites who whispered that old Layton's *chef* never made a mistake, and that the wine at Laxton was beyond criticism. Then it had the cosiest smoking-room, the prettiest drawing-room, and the pleasantest billiard-room it was possible to imagine. Old Richard Layton was the most genial of hosts, not falling into that terrible sin of

those that have acquired their wealth by successful trading, to wit, the recapitulation of what every article on the premises cost them. If Dick Layton, the only son, could be merely catalogued as of the "inoffensives," and Mamma as deficient in colour of character, who could deny that the girls were charming?—and it might puzzle a man to choose between Annie, of the dark brown hair and hazel eyes, and the younger sister, Gracie, with a somewhat fairer complexion, with a shade more red in her hair, and a *soupeçon* of green in her iris. The Honble. Jim would rough it without a murmur when occasion required; indeed, he bore the reputation among his fellows of being what in the shibboleth of the day is termed "deuced hard," but like most men of that class, he could appreciate rose-leaves and the valley of the lotus-eaters. He regarded Laxton as a haven that a man should put into once a year, if it was only to keep up his

charter of doing so. "Not a house to be shut out of," quoth Jim, "when you've quite done with your whelpdom."

Laxton, like Liddington, laid in Bloomshire, although upon the other side of the country, and it had so chanced that Harold Luxmoore had never as yet met the Laytons. The country gentlemen upon his side had not taken up the Laxton people, although in their own division they were generally visited. A few years usually floats these new-comers into society nowadays, when they have *bonhomie*, a French cook, a long purse, and pretty good shooting to support them, more especially if they preserve foxes. And old Layton failed in none of these things. No one who had ever pillowed his head at Laxton but was fain to admit that the thing was done right well and liberally. Richard Layton found little difficulty in filling his house, and with people of good birth and position to boot. The pride of

caste is somewhat on the wane, railways and the telegraph are mighty levellers, and the new man has a start in these days with reference to society that was quite beyond his compass some fifty years ago—more especially should he have sporting instincts, and Richard Layton had these. He dearly loved a gallop with the hounds, or a day's shooting, although but a moderate performer at either diversion, and lost his ten pound on the Derby with a regularity both pleasing and praiseworthy.

Jim cast a quick glance round the room as he entered it just before dinner, and greeted his hostess and her daughters, whom he had not as yet seen. He was a great favourite with the family, about him they were unanimous, and the Laytons very often were not about those congregated beneath their roof tree. Mamma, with slightly aristocratic predilections, was a little wont to turn up her nose at some of her husband's old business friends, while the girls

were often indignant at some of their brother's introductions, but Jim Laceby they were one and all ever glad to see.

"Months since we've seen you, Mr. Laceby," said Annie, as Jim leisurely deposited himself by her side on the sofa, "and we know you too well to suppose we shall be able to keep you long, much as you know we should wish it."

Annie Layton never much heeded what she said to the Honble. Jim. Young ladies never did, somehow ; it was not his age, but the veriest flirt that ever tried her hand generally experienced a conviction that it was no use coquetting with Jim Laceby. Women knew, as women intuitively do know such things, that he would never make love to them, and you may not believe it, but women are always rather fond of a man they feel they can be confidential with and not be misunderstood.

"No," replied Jim, "I'm sorry I have only a few days to give you, but I've four

brutes eating their heads off at Grantham that will certainly go wrong if I don't set 'em going again. Idleness is the root of all evil, you know, Miss Layton, especially cracked heels and puffy legs."

"Well, we must make the most of you while we have you," returned Annie Layton. "You came from Liddington, didn't you?"

Jim nodded.

"Ah, we have never seen Mr. Luxmoore our side. He keeps a large racing stud, does he not?"

"Yes; he has a tolerably large breeding establishment at the Grange, and a string in training at Blithedown. You've got Mrs. Richeton here, I see."

"And you're to take her in to dinner. I hope you appreciate her—I don't."

"Why not? Poor woman! she must have had an awful hard time during her wedded life, if I was any judge of Richeton. Who's that fellow with the dark moustache talking to her?"

"A Mr. Holt, some friend of Dick's, and, to do him justice, much less objectionable than Dick's friends usually are."

"Holt! ah, I know Berkley Holt. I've heard of him, though I never met him."

Annie Layton looked up inquisitively, but just then dinner was announced, and the Honble. Jim was directed to take charge of Mrs. Richeton.

Berkley Holt was known by reputation, at all events, to most men who mixed much in the world. One of those who lived mysteriously, and had obtained and maintained a footing in society, Heaven only knows how. He was a notorious defaulter on the Turf, and yet he was present at most of the principal race meetings of the year. He apparently never paid anybody, and apparently nobody ever expected that he ever would, and yet he always found neophytes rash enough to bet with him, and tradesmen still so confiding as to enter him on their books. These things are,

and no one can say how it is so. A hard-working, honest, professional man may find it difficult to get credit to the tune of three or four hundred pounds, while plausible Berkley Holt, with neither profession nor prospects, owed indefinite thousands, yet nobody ever thought of being hard upon "poor Berkley." How he had first established this extraordinary claim upon the commiseration of his fellows it is impossible to conceive, but he had done so, and drew upon it to the fullest extent. There was no praiseworthy action that could by any possibility be remembered to his credit, while doubtful stories regarding his morals and principles were plentiful as blackberries in September; yet Berkley Holt still clung like a burr to society's skirts, and society seemed quite to acquiesce that it should be so. To owe and to borrow was his normal condition, and nobody seemed much to mind his owing, while there seemed always young gentlemen just

beginning life, who were willing to lend for the gratification of being launched upon town by such an experienced mentor. They grew to understand that' he was a costly preceptor in time, but seldom cherished any grudge against Berkley for the somewhat exhaustive education he had bestowed upon them.

"Haven't seen you for some time, Mrs. Richeton," said Laceby, as he handed the fair widow to her seat. "Is it fair to ask how you have been employed all this autumn, and who has been the worse for encountering your fatal self?"

"I've been reserving myself entirely for your subjugation," replied the widow with a low musical laugh. "Don't you know, sir, that I've serious designs upon you?"

"Well, I didn't," replied Jim, gravely; "but, of course, if you have, I've only to ask when it is to be, and beg you to postpone it till after the hunting season, if not very inconvenient. When Mrs. Richeton deigns

to be in earnest we not only succumb, but lose our heads besides."

"Fancy you losing your head about anything, much less a woman," rejoined the widow gaily; "but, tell me, you've just come from Liddington. What's it like, and how's Mr. Luxmoore?"

"Harold is as well as a fellow can be, and we'd three rattling good days' shooting. It's a nice old place enough. Not so perfect as this, of course—none of your old places ever can be. Art of house-building's always on the improve; and if ever you want to be uncomfortable, just accept an invitation to stay in a castle. I did once. A ghostly big bedroom, one might have played rackets in, with a fire in the corner that smoked; corridors that one might have run hundred-yard races in, but through which the wind positively roared; fireplaces everywhere as big as a good sized dog-kennel; no billiard-room, no smoking-room, and no bells that rung.

Don't let's talk of it. I feel rheumatic at the bare recollection."

"Ah, well," replied Mrs. Richeton, smiling, "we don't come across many houses so thoroughly comfortable as this."

"No, unfortunately—nor many cooks as good. Pardon me, you shouldn't pass those *cotellettes à Madame l'Archiduc*."

"Miserable *gourmand*, it is hopeless to talk to you——"

"At dinner; no. I can certainly do two things at once; eat and talk. To dine without conversation is repugnant to civilized people. Proceed, lady fair."

"Has Mr. Luxmoore anything promising in the racing way?" inquired the widow.

"My dear Mrs. Richeton, don't think for one moment but what I would betray the secrets of the stable to you if I knew them, but I don't. All I saw at Liddington were some brood mares, foals, etc."

"Well, I suppose we shall see him in town next season?"

"Most certainly, and early too, I fancy, as he's not at all satisfied with the hunting in Bloomshire. May I ask how long you've known Berkley Holt?"

"Hum! about forty-eight hours, I think. It might be a few more. Why?"

"Oh, nothing; merely I fancied he was a new acquaintance."

"Quite so," remarked the widow. "He tells me he's a distant cousin of Harold Luxmoore's."

"Yes; can't be too distant, I should think. Should prefer him as an Australian cousin rather tied down to his property, if I were Harold."

"You don't like him?" said Mrs. Riche-ton, interrogatively.

"I don't know him, but I don't expect to when I do."

"Why? I find him rather pleasant."

"Quite so, no doubt; but I don't think he's quite my sort, you know; and I fancy it just possible you may some day be my way of thinking——"

"If you mean to hint that he's regarded as a rather *mauvais sujet*, I'm aware of that," replied Mrs. Richeton.

"No, I don't mean that *exactly*. Let me give you some wine," replied the Honble. Jim.

Most assuredly he did not quite mean that, for the "rather" was a qualifying or description that Jim Laceby would have never been induced to subscribe to. If he did not know Berkley Holt personally, he knew quite enough about him to have made up his mind pretty conclusively concerning him. The Honble. Jim was by no means straight-laced, but against men of Berkley Holt's stamp his opinions were determinate, very. In fact, he would have positively refused to meet or be introduced to him had it come in such shape that the option of rejection had been left him. As it was, he must make the best of it.

Mrs. Richeton, of course, thoroughly

comprehended that Laceby meant to turn the conversation. She supposed that he had reasons of his own for objecting to Berkley Holt, but it did not occur to her at all what they might be. She did not quite understand her neighbour ; holding somewhat elastic views herself as to the shortcomings of those she met with in the world, she looked upon it that the imperturbable, easy-going Jim Laceby, with a taste for the Turf and other similar devices, must be a very lenient judge of such a man as Berkley Holt. There were plenty of people in her set who tolerated him, and acquiescing in that marvellous epithet of commiseration which he had succeeded in attaching to his name, pitied "poor Berkley!" She did not comprehend that Laceby held a pretty strict code of honour, and that, with all their apparent easiness and loose talk, there were many who, like him, looked upon it that there are certain infringements of that code which

placed a man without the pale. There is a laxity upon some of these points nowadays which cannot sufficiently be regretted, and according to one of our most popular novelists, in a late work, to bet, play, and not pay is the prevailing fashion. Still, let us hope there are yet plenty left who, like Jim Laceby, hold contrary opinions with some obduracy, and contend that when a man ceases to pay it is quite time that he should cease to bet; further speculation on his part bearing a marvellous resemblance to what, were the laying or taking of odds cognisant of the law, would secure him an opinion from twelve of his countrymen on his proceedings.

Mrs. Layton bends her head, and the ladies, in obedience to her summons, shake out their skirts, and disappear from the dining-room. The men betake themselves to olives, claret, and general conversation, in which Berkley Holt bears a prominent part. Then comes coffee, and, midst a

peal of laughter at Mr. Holt's last anecdote, they also melt away to the drawing-room.

"I think you know a cousin of mine very well, Mr. Laceby?" remarked Berkley Holt, edging himself next Jim as they ascended the stairs.

"I know Harold Luxmoore, if you mean him," replied Jim with a curtness that would have discouraged many men.

"Exactly. Been staying with him, haven't you?"

"I have come here from Liddington."

"Just so. Hope you had good sport there. The shooting used to be good in old Oliver's time."

"There's not much to complain of about it now," said the Honble. Jim frigidly.

"I fancy we've met in days gone by," continued Holt. "Let's see, where was it?—Ascot; Doncaster. I'm sure I've met you racing somewhere."

"It would be probably outside the ring, wherever it was, Mr. Holt, I should

imagine," retorted the Honble. Jim languidly, but looking his interlocutor very straight in the face as they gained the top of the staircase.

Berkley Holt turned sharp upon his heel, and made his way to the drawing-room with an angry flush upon his brow, and a rigid resolve to be upshots with Jim Laceby should the opportunity be vouchsafed him. To be reminded that he could not show his face in the betting ring, consequent upon his defalcations, was an offence Berkley Holt was little likely to forget, and if he paid no other debts, he acquitted himself of such as these with great punctiliousness.

CHAPTER IV.

THEODORA RICHTON.

"WHAT an impostor you are, Mr. Laceby!" said Annie Layton in a low tone as that gentleman dropped into a chair by her side upon gaining the drawing-room.

"No doubt," replied the Honble. Jim calmly; "we all are. How have I exceeded my fellows in imposture just now?"

"Why, you said you didn't like Mrs. Richeton, and you've been flirting disgracefully with her all dinner time."

"Wouldn't be the slightest degree of imposition in that, I should contend, even if you were quite correct in your facts, Miss Layton. We, and so do you, often

flirt to some slight extent with people we don't care about ; but I never said I didn't like Mrs. Richeton. I hate trouble, and I never exerted myself so far as to make my mind up about her one way or the other."

" But you should, you know."

" I decline altogether to embark in such an elaborate and extensive speculation, as to what ' I should, you know, ' " retorted Laceby with his habitual indolent smile.

" Mr. Laceby, " returned Annie, menacing him with her fan, " you always yield when I insist, remember, and I really require that you should make up your mind about Mrs. Richeton."

" Very well, " replied Jim quietly.

There was a slight pause, and then Miss Layton said, " Now, what is it ? "

" Don't know, " returned Jim calmly. " Couldn't make up my mind on such an important matter as a pretty woman without due consideration. You can't expect a man to form an opinion of a feminine

fellow-creature after the fashion that he writes a post-card."

"You're trifling with me, sir," said Annie, her eyes dancing with fun. "If you won't tell me what you think of her, what am I to think of Mr. Holt?"

"I don't mind telling you what I think of him," rejoined Jim, in his usual languid tones; "but are we not to have some music?"

Miss Layton turned rather quickly round upon her companion, and as she did so discovered at once the reason of the somewhat inconsequential finish of his reply. Berkley Holt had strolled up to the adjacent table, and was carelessly looking over a photograph-book.

"Yes; I think we must have some music," she replied, rising. "Conversation generally requires a little supplementing. I must ask Mrs. Richeton to do something for us. Don't you admire her singing?"

"Certainly I do, but I'm not much of

a judge. I go to the Opera in the season just as everybody else goes, yet I'll admit I'm heathen enough to be bored at times. Wagner strikes me, for instance, as a good deal like Milton—

‘A little heavy, but no less sublime.’”

Mrs. Richeton acceded at once to Annie's petition that she would sing them something. The widow had a fine contralto voice, and was quite aware of it—not the woman, indeed, to overlook her advantages, and they were considerable. A tall, somewhat stately brunette, no one could deny she was a very striking person, and few, especially men, would have denied her claim to be accounted a very handsome woman. She enjoyed the *éclat* of being a widow, in the meridian of her beauty, with a claim on the world's sympathies in consideration of the acknowledged unhappiness of her past wedded life. There was no actual evidence that Tom Richeton had ill-treated her, but the departed Richeton

had been a coarse, boisterous, unpopular man, with an avid lust for strong waters, and it was quite possible. Theodora Richeton never opened her mouth on the subject, but she would droop her long, dark lashes, slightly elevate her straight, dark brows, sigh, and give deprecatory little shrugs of her shapely shoulders, which expressed infinitely more than any words could have contained. When a woman passes as a martyr to society she usually, if clever, refrains from speech. The accusation against her husband, implied by her impersonation of Ariadne, becomes vast in proportion to its vagueness. Mrs. Richeton had been an immense success in this *rôle*, and had no lack of unscrupulous admirers, anxious to console her for the neglect with which she was treated.

But Theodora Richeton had been far too circumspect to give society any opportunity of scandalous gossip at her expense;

consequently, when Tom Richton, after endeavouring to drown his disgust at a very bad week at Newmarket, fell under the railway carriage instead of into it, the world had nothing but sympathy to offer upon the occasion, while the consolation of the handsome widow became a thing not only desirable but imperative upon some one of those that were still both unmated and unmoneyed. But Mrs. Richton showed herself in no hurry to put her neck once more beneath the yoke, and till last season, when she had undoubtedly shown considerable favour to Harold Luxmoore, no man could flatter himself that he had made much progress in her good graces.

While the widow is warbling "*Per sua Madre*" in her pure contralto, three of her hearers are speculating about her in a manner that would somewhat surprise her, could she but know it. Annie Layton is wondering why she should have such an

unreasoning mistrust of their guest, and taking herself to task for not having conceived a liking for her instead of rather the reverse. Jim Laceby muses thoughtfully about Harold Luxmoore's last remark at Liddington. "You're a good deal out, Master Harold," he murmurs to himself, "if you think she considers your little affair over. Not ask after you, indeed! didn't she?—rather, and I should say with considerable interest, as far as I'm a judge. No, next time you meet, whatever your quarrel may have been, you'll find *la belle* Richeton prepared to take up that flirtation exactly where she laid it down, unless I'm much mistaken."

Berkley Holt, too, was immersed in speculation concerning the handsome widow—a good-looking man, about five and thirty, of medium height, with quick, glittering, dark eyes, and a somewhat defiant manner, the result of his doubtful position; for Berkley was quite aware that he was

now numbered amongst those only "tolerated of society," having forfeited his social status by countless acts hardly recognized as admissible even by easy-going moralists. His advances had been curtly rejected by others as well as the Honble. Jim. Rebuffs of that kind, indeed, are common enough to all these black mutttons who live their precarious existence on either side of society's boundary fence; but there was never a dark sheep of them all who bore such disaster with more stoicism. His *aplomb* was unbounded, and his belief in himself unextinguishable. Despite that his whole life had been one unmitigated failure, there never was a man so imbued with the principle of *il faut se fair valoir*. He was eternally scheming, and always as boldly and hopefully as of yore. Just now his busy brain is calculating whether there is a chance of inducing Mrs. Richeton to become Mrs. Holt. He has known her by sight for some time, as he occasionally

flitted fitfully through the somewhat fast circle in which she habitually moved ; but he never knew her to speak to till he found himself domiciled with her at Laxton.

His presence there was owing to his having scraped an acquaintance with facile and somewhat fatuous Richard Layton on some race-course. Richard Layton—some men have—had a faculty for knowing *mauvais sujets* ; he had a perfect gift of picking up with those whom wiser men rather held at arms' length, and was wont to be reckless in his general invitations. Men of Holt's class reduce a general invitation to a specific one, in a way that often electrifies the giver. They work it all out with the ease and rapidity of a wrangler solving a simple quadratic equation. Richard Layton was always feebly pleading, in answer to his sister's upbraidings, anent the somewhat strange acquaintance he occasionally introduced to Laxton,—

“By Jove ! I never thought he'd come,

you know ; only said I hoped he'd give us a look in if he happened to be our way. How was I to guess he'd be our way a week afterwards ? ”

“ You goose, Dick ! ” his sisters would retort ; “ those sort of men are always sure to be your way very speedily. ” But, as Annie had said, they had looked upon Berkley Holt as by no means objectionable.

Berkley, a University man, and of good family, of course had all the manner of a man accustomed to mix in good society, doubtful as his *status* there might now be. He was a clever man, and had he worked at his profession—he had been called to the bar—instead of devoting himself to Ascot, Newmarket, etc., might have been now doing well. As it was, what little money he had was long ago run through, and how he lived at present one of numberless similar social mysteries.

But the last notes of “ *Per sua Madre* ”

die away upon Mrs. Richeton's rosy lips, and the conversation, which had been hushed for the song, now again becomes general, amidst a chorus of charming, delicious, delightful, thank you, the widow retires gracefully from the instrument, dexterously evading an encore by a promise to sing again later on. Mrs. Richeton knows too well what uncharitable feelings may be evoked by too long continuance at the piano, let the singer sing ever so sweetly. Are there not other damsels with much belief in their vocalization invariably awaiting their turn with impatience; ladies who would follow Titien or Patti without misgiving—have we not all seen it, and, alas! sorrowfully heard it? The lady that sings, like the man that speaks, is loathe to miss an opportunity; and the daughter of the rector of the parish loses no time in displaying her ideas of song, which, if not particularly harmonious, are at all events emphatic.

Such music is, of course, intended only for the purpose of masking conversation.

“What is Mr. Luxmoore like?” inquired Annie Layton of Jim Laceby. “Has he any other tastes besides field sports and racing? Does he care about society, for instance?”

“Yes, very fond of it, indeed; goes everywhere. Hunting and shooting he was always fond of; as for racing, I don’t think he ever troubled himself much about that till he inherited it.”

“How do you mean inherited it?”

“Well, he came into all old Oliver Luxmoore’s property, which, of course, included all his racing establishment, so that he considers himself bound to carry it on for a bit, at all events. His uncle, I believe, expressed a strong wish he should.” Although Jim Laceby was quite aware of the current report in the Liddington country that Harold was bound by will to continue on the turf, he, like many

of Luxmoore's friends, deemed it no more than a desire that the old man had given expression to in his last illness. He knew Harold said he was bound to win the Derby, but he looked upon that as a mere fashion of speaking. He did not comprehend that he was obliged, under heavy legal penalties, to continue the breeding and running of horses. Few of his friends, indeed, believed this; they had some of them heard the story, but conceived it founded on no more than a strong request, embodied in the will, that he should at all events try for some time longer to achieve that goal for which poor Oliver Luxmoore had striven in vain, cross his pet mares judiciously as he might. It is so at times. The caprice of fortune is curious in many ways. Lord George Bentinck never could attain the Isthmian wreath, while the young heir of Streatlam carried it off pretty well on obtaining his majority, and has lived to be crowned thrice since.

“Then he goes out in London, and that sort of thing,” remarked Miss Layton.

“Of course he does; he’s been abroad a good deal, but no man enters into all ‘the go’ of the London season with more *verve* than Harold Luxmoore. You must let me introduce him to you all when we get back to town; as residents in the same county, of course, you ought to be acquainted, and I’m quite as sure you will like him, as I am that you won’t like Berkley Holt when you ever come to know him.”

“Ah! Tell me about him.”

“Not a word more. He’s eyes like a hawk, and ears like a hare, and both have been actively on duty since I have been in the drawing-room.”

“Why, you said you had never met him.”

“Just so; but I’ve met him in other men’s mouths, and not much to his benefit. Never mind him. I shall tell Harold

he must know you all. You will have to make papa send him his card and a dinner ticket, and I'll see it's attended to."

"Very good, your highness," laughed the girl. "We do know that you never introduce us to anybody that isn't nice."

"What! you've forgiven me old Lady Firebrasser?"

"Well, she was a trial, I admit; but we know there were diplomatic reasons for that."

"Yes; and you'll find Liddington Grange a pleasant house to stay in at times, when there's anything going on that side the country. Wants a mistress, which no doubt it will get ere long. It looked last year as if your friend Mrs. Richeton had some idea of taking the responsibility upon her handsome shoulders."

"No, really! I had no idea of that; but we don't see much of her in town. You know we're not in her set exactly."

"There was gossip about them; but

stop, you must interfere. Look! that unhappy girl is going once more to demonstrate her ignorance of music. Make Mrs. Richeton sing again, in pity to us—and her——”

Miss Layton glides to the piano, and dexterously insisting upon the young lady in possession not tiring herself, with a saucy glance at Laceby sits down thereat, and calling her sister to her aid, embarks upon a duet. The girls' voices are fresh and clear; moreover, they have been well-taught and thoroughly instructed as to the tether of their capabilities. The result is, that they sing together prettily and pleasingly; instruction in the tether of our capabilities in this world being a branch of education that cannot be too highly commended, however painful it may be at the time for the pupil. Berkley Holt, in pursuance of his lightly-sketched design, had joined Mrs. Richeton immediately upon her retreat from the piano,

and commenced to make himself agreeable, with his usual audacity. He could talk well enough, and be pleasant enough when it served his purpose, notwithstanding, a keen observer might have noticed a slight repression of himself, such as is common enough amongst those who, living chiefly amongst men habitually coarse in manner and thought, find themselves thrown among well-bred women. Berkley Holt, it need scarcely be said, was no novice in the ways of good society ; but the slang of the betting ring, and his coarser haunts, rose so naturally to his lips, that he required to keep some watch over himself to prevent such expressions escaping his mouth. He flatters himself he is getting on very well with the widow, an idea that would be natural to any male creature with as good an opinion of himself as Berkley. Mrs. Richeton is fond of and accustomed to adulation ; accustomed to smile sweetly upon any

good-looking man who pays court to her ; but Theodora Richeton is no fool. She likes to be flattered, and is always caressing in her manner to the adorer of the hour ; but she troubles her head little further about the matter, and her flirtations, on the whole, have left little mark as far as she has been concerned.

“ I trust you will allow me to call upon you when you return to town,” said Berkley, at last. “ I have often, of course, encountered you in society, though I never had the pleasure of making your acquaintance.”

Hardly the fact ; they did know each other by sight, and occasionally crossed in society, but by no means often.

Theodora Richeton was a little staggered by this bold request. She had a somewhat dim perception of Holt's status in society, and most assuredly had not meant that their three days' or so acquaintance was to open her door to him. Still she had no

excuse ready to her hand at that moment, so she smiled, and said she should be delighted, with an inward reservation about being at home to a gentleman of such consummate forwardness. But now Mrs. Richeton is called upon to redeem her promise, and once more her sweet contralto notes float through the room, and again the buzz of conversation is hushed. Jim Laceby, lounging upon an ottoman somewhat in the background, suddenly catches the tones of Berkley Holt. He is talking in a low voice to Dick Layton.

"I'm off to the smoking-room for a quiet cigar before the lot of you come in. I must make an early start of it to-morrow, as I got a telegram just before dinner which compels my return to town. You can make my adieu to everybody to-morrow. I hate causing a fuss, so shall clear out quietly."

"All right; sorry you must go, but of course you know best," returned Richard

Layton, after the usual flabby manner in which he was accustomed to take farewell of his guests. So many of these had turned out failures in the eyes of his family, that it was always somewhat of a relief to get them safely off the premises. Holt had been a tolerable success; but Dick thought on a prolonged visit he also might be found fault with. He was always repenting these ill-advised invitations, but, nevertheless, when carried away by wine and good-fellowship, could never abstain from issuing them. As before said, too, his faculty for fraternising with the black sheep was instinctive.

“Wonder whether my appearance and determination not to know him had anything to say to that telegraph?” mused Jim. “Hardly, I should say. From what I’ve heard of Berkley Holt, he’s much too cool a hand to be put down by a trifle like that.”

CHAPTER V.

SUMMING UP THE POSITION.

BERKLEY HOLT lived in Cavendish Chambers, Duke Street, Portland Place, not that he was in the habit of communicating that address indiscriminately to either his friends or tradesmen. Mr. Holt thoroughly understood the value of peace and quietness, and detested the annoyance of calls from friends to whom he had lost money, or of unfortunate tradesmen grown weary of his promises to pay. Berkley, like most gentlemen whose income may be said to arise from the well springs of Providence, was lavish on three points only—his personal expenditure, his I O U's, and his

promises, fixed or undefined ; but he had the natural dislike of his kind to being brought to book concerning such transactions, and held that all settlement, except decidedly in his favour, was to be ever indefinitely postponed.

He invariably gave his address at a fashionable play club in the Piccadilly neighbourhood, more noted for its high stakes than the moral atmosphere prevalent within its walls. A club that numbered plenty of the *élite* upon its books, nevertheless, including several members who had retired from other establishments of the kind, in accordance with some prudish rules, not thought much of at the "Hædulus." They did not want you at the "Hædulus" unless you played ; they esteemed you more highly if you paid when luck was hard against you, but they did not altogether give the cold shoulder, even to those who were unable to settle. Established, as its promoters averred, for

the purpose of enabling a man to accomplish a quiet and early rubber, it had advanced considerably beyond the ken of those modest speculators, who had, doubtless, Arcadian views of shilling-whist till twelve, and never contemplated the wild loo and baccarat orgies, for which the club was now celebrated. Poor, miserable, deceived apostles of an early whist movement, they doubtless groaned, but they went with the days they lived in, and for the pool at "unlimited" with the worst of the unrighteous.

The "Hædulus" was a club with a reputation. There were fabulous rumours of the sums lost behind its Stygian portals, often supplemented by the observation, "And paid up every cent, by Jove!" which did, to the outside world, savour a little of being a somewhat sharp though indirect comment on that jocund community. It was whispered about, that to have been declared bankrupt, to have had to renounce

three or four well-known clubs, and to have an established character for impecuniosity, were rather qualifications for being of the "Hædulus" than otherwise. If so, Berkley Holt had qualified; at all events, he was one of that honourable body.

Staring into the blazing fire, a cigar in his mouth, his slippered feet resting comfortably on the fender, Berkley sits in his cosy chambers, meditating gravely upon many things. His debts trouble this cynical philosopher not an iota, play or otherwise. It is against his creed to part with money to any one unless it becomes a dire necessity; but of course he encounters, especially at play, men who will be paid. How he does get it is a mystery that puzzles Berkley's world; but the older hands in his set hold it is an axiom that he can always be made to disburse his losings, providing they are of moderate dimensions, if sufficient pressure be exercised. It is, perhaps, in great measure

owing to that belief, men still more or less bet and play with Berkley Holt.

As he has abandoned his profession, so has he kicked down his chances in life. Son of a niece of Oliver Luxmoore's, the old gentleman had, in Berkley's university days, been extremely kind to him. At that time, when Harold Luxmoore was still a boy at Eton, Berkley had been much at Liddington. He became a great favourite with the old squire, on account of his general love of field sports, but more especially from the astuteness he showed with regard to turf matters. There was never any probability of the old man making him his heir ; but he most assuredly would have inherited something handsome at his death but for his own misconduct.

Pretty Lizzie Dixon, the daughter of a respectable tenant farmer on the Liddington estate, had succeeded her aunt, Mrs. Hamper, as still-room maid at the Grange. It was the old story. Lizzie Dixon listened,

faltered, refused, consented, and one fine morning stole away to be married with Berkley Holt. That she was ruined, but not married, it were needless to say. Promises were things Berkley was ever prodigal of; but the old squire, though no puritan, was very wrathful when the tale came to his ears, as of course it speedily did. He vowed he would have no more to say to a connection who had failed to respect his household and his tenantry. It was an insult to himself that a girl beneath his roof-tree should have been corrupted, for Oliver Luxmoore held some queer old-fashioned notions, not quite compatible with these days—more's the pity—about the obligations of bread and salt. He never knew very much about Berkley's career afterwards. He never knew that poor Lizzie Dixon died broken-hearted from shame, neglect, and ill-treatment within a couple of years. That Berkley had been notorious for one or two bits of extremely

sharp practice on the turf he was aware ; but the worst part of Berkley's career never came to his knowledge, or it is scarcely possible that he would have put his name down for even an improbable reversion of Liddington Grange.

"Hum!" mutters Berkley, still staring into the glowing coals for inspiration. "I wonder what the fool can want to see me about? If it's money, I haven't got it, and he must know that. I want it. I usually do. I have ever since I can remember. Talk about man's wants or rights, he never wants but that one thing. He can command all the rest then. I rather wish I hadn't got so mixed up with the fellow. I thought it would be easy to be his master, but the cunning hound waxes somewhat bumptious, and is not so easy to manage as I first thought him. Who could have suspected that wizened little anatomy knew so much, and could pull so many strings as he appears to be able

to do. I meant him to serve my ends, and it's just dawning upon me that he has some motive of his own in assisting me. I wonder again what that can be. / It was curious, very, his migrating from London to set up for himself in Liddington as soon as I told him about old Oliver Luxmoore's will. True, he said that he was doing no good here, and that he could probably both better himself and look after my interests to greater advantage if he went down there, and yet I've somehow a suspicion that he turned over more money in that ramshackle little office in Crutched Friars than the look of the place warranted. I've known men of his kidney worth a deal of money, whose business places looked equally unlike the Pactolian fountain. He always vows his inability to lend more than small sums, but they all do when I want to borrow, varied with great difficulty about finding even them; yet if I had bonds or securities to offer,

I shouldn't be surprised to discover that my esteemed friend Larcher could find a biggish sum at short notice. I wonder, by the way, whether he still keeps that blessed little hole in Crutched Friars. Hang me if I don't make a pilgrimage to see some of these days."

Then his thoughts wander back to that little drama of nine years ago, in which he played the villain. He muses uneasily over the fair trusting blue-eyed girl, whom he persuaded to elope with him—"a mistake that, yes, a devil of a mistake." Old Oliver had been bound to have done something for him but for that. He thinks dreamily of the sweet face and well-rounded figure, and his face darkens as he recalls how he treated his victim. "Well, it was her fault more than his," he mutters with an angry curse. "What business had she to worry him with her tears and remorse because he had not married her?—as if he had not plenty of troubles of his

own to contend with just then—ravening duns and an incensed uncle, who hardened his heart to all letters of contrition. A mistake—yes!” But was it quite fair to make the girl, who had sacrificed everything for him, the target of his sullen gibes because his passions had for once failed to be subservient to his interests? A flush of shame crosses his brow even now, as he remembers the felon blow that he dealt her that night in his cups. He never saw her again. When he awoke from his alcoholic lethargy Lizzie Dixon was gone. He tries once more to justify himself, as men always do when looking backward over the blackness of their lives. We would all fain rehabilitate ourselves at such times. She might have known that he had been losing, had been drinking, that he was not in his right senses. Poor soul! she had seen rather too much of him in this state of late, and when he smote her with his clenched fist, the girl’s proud spirit

revolted. Had she not deemed his love dead he might have beaten her till he laid her in her grave, but if she could not have love she would brook no longer injustice and ill-treatment. Lizzie carried off that night her bruise and the unborn babe destined to deprive her of life; and Berkley Holt never knew more of her till a black-edged letter, some months afterwards, informed him of her death and burial.

Grim reflections these; and so Berkley apparently thinks, for he throws his cigar impatiently into the fire, and mixing a stiff glass of brandy and water, swallows half its contents at a gulp. But he mutters "What is the use of looking back? It is only fools who continue pondering over the lost tricks; the wise man concentrates himself upon the fresh deal. My friend Larcher, I shall curse you with special vindictiveness if you have summoned me to town for nothing. Whether it was worth going on with one would have seen

later on ; but I'll own I should like to have prosecuted my flirtation with the fair widow. Another thing, I wished to get a firmer foothold in Laxton—a house to stick to that.”

When Berkley Holt got into a house, and had made up his mind regarding it, after this fashion, he was as difficult to dislodge as a limpet. He adhered to the establishment as pertinaciously as his crustaceous likeness to the rock of its affections. He invited himself in an off-hand manner, and if you couldn't have him this week—well, he would come next. I don't think the intelligence that the family was out would have quite choked off Berkley, unless supplemented with the information that so also were the cook and the butler.

A gentle tap at the door, to which Holt responds with an authoritative “Come in,” and Mr. Larcher glides gently through the half-opened door into the apartment. Mr. Larcher always, when it depends upon

himself, comes round a door ; he never throws one open and advances boldly into the room, always round it. When it is opened fully for him, he has a way of wriggling in round the door-post that is uncomfortable. He is rather addicted to similar wriggling in his conversation, having a way of going round and round the subject in question, but never at it. Still it would be rather a mistake to accuse Mr. Larcher of inconsequential wandering in his discourse. It might be curious, but it was nevertheless true, that after talking a thing over with Mr. Larcher, you never, on reflecting over it afterwards, could call to mind that he had any opinion about it, though you had a hazy idea of having expressed your own sentiments pretty freely.

“ How are you, Larcher ? Come in, sit down, have a cigar, and let’s hear what it’s all about. You don’t telegraph to me for nothing, I presume ? ”

"No ; it cost a shilling," replied Mr. Larcher, with a chuckle, "but you're quite right, my dear Holt. I'm not given to throwing shillings away. I wanted to see you," and as he spoke the attorney insinuated himself into an easy chair.

"What about ?" replied Berkley curtly.

"Oh, a good many things. Didn't you say a cigar ?"

"Yes, here you are, and help yourself to brandy."

"Thank you very much. This really is most excellent tobacco. Where do you get them ?"

"Never mind now. I'll write down the address for you afterwards. What is it ?"

"Well, I think soda," replied Mr. Larcher, puffing benignly at his cigar. "It goes better with the cognac than plain water, to my mind."

"Psha !" exclaimed Holt, with undisguised impatience, "help yourself, it's on

the table. What is it you want to see me about ?”

“One can’t open soda water and talk business,” replied Mr. Larcher, as he proceeded to perform that ceremony. “How impatient you are. Wait till I feel myself a bit comfortable. Your curiosity is mastering your natural politeness. You are exclaiming what is it I want almost before asking what is it I’ll take. The courtesies of life, my dear sir, the courtesies of life ; we should never forget them,” concluded Mr. Larcher, unctiously, as, having mixed himself a jorum, he resumed his seat.

Berkley Holt eyed his visitor with unmitigated disgust. It would not exactly suit him to quarrel with Larcher, but he was chafing inwardly at what he considered the impertinence of a man whom he deemed his tool, and looked upon as socially beneath him. Yet he felt that it was incumbent on him that he should keep his temper.

“Why did I wish to see you?” continued Mr. Larcher. “Well, my dear friend, for many reasons. Perhaps I was anxious about your health. I’ve a slight pecuniary interest in it, you know. Perhaps I’ve news to give you of your cousin Harold; perhaps, I thought, you might like to hear how I was getting on at Liddington.”

Berkley Holt’s lip curled as he replied, “Yes, I can fancy it, of course, highly probable that any or all of those reasons induced you to telegraph to me. You’re quite right; no one knows better than I do that you don’t throw shillings away. What news is there in Liddington?”

“Not much, sir, not much. The people about there seem to want pluck to be quarrelsome and litigious, and are not civilized enough to comprehend the luxury of a law-suit. There has been some excellent shooting, and a colt or two foaled at the Grange, and I’ve discovered that

one Berkley Holt bears no good reputation in those parts."

"Oh! they gossip of me yet down there, do they? What do they allege to my detriment?" asked Holt with knit brows.

"Dear me, a trifle. I'm surprised they still remember it. A mere chit of a country girl, who was vain enough to think herself mate for your worship, and believe you when you told her so. It is too ridiculous that such a juvenile *faux pas* should be still remembered against you," replied the attorney, with a low, harsh, cackling laugh.

"Silence!" thundered Holt. "I want to hear no more of that. It's of the past, and I'll trouble you to allude to it no more."

"They talk of it yet in Liddington," retorted the other, drily.

"Whatever they do in Liddington, I'll not hear of it from you or any one. There are passages in most men's lives they

brook neither jest nor criticism on. Bear that in mind in future."

Mr. Larcher's ferret-like eyes gleamed wickedly upon his companion for a moment. If Holt had not been once more gazing moodily into the fire there was an antagonism in them which might have arrested his attention. It was a malevolent, mutinous look that augured ill for the relationship that Berkley proposed should exist between himself and his confederate.

"I will remember," replied Mr. Larcher slowly. "I wanted to see you for the purpose of getting somewhat fuller instructions than I possess at present. I am to watch Harold Luxmoore's proceedings at Liddington. Good! But it would be better to tell me more particularly in what direction."

"Evidently in two. You know all about the will?"

"Of course. I advanced money on it;

not much, I'll admit, but something on the possibility of the reversion."

"Well," said Holt, rising, and turning his back upon the fire, "it is obviously to our interest that Harold Luxmoore should not win the Derby."

Mr. Larcher nodded.

"In the second place, it is equally our interest that he should not marry."

Again the attorney nodded.

"And, thirdly, if anything called him to a brighter and happier sphere without his having attained either of these ends, there is no denying it would be a deuced good thing for me."

The two men gazed keenly into each other's faces, as it may be presumed men generally do when they first hint at the possibility of crime to one another. Holt's remark carried no such interpretation literally, but the low, stern tone in which it was couched gave his companion thoroughly to understand that he was

not likely to stand at anything which might help to clear the way for his own succession to the Liddington estates.

Mr. Larcher said nothing in reply, but mused with half-closed eyes over a perfect chaos of malpractices, in which the poisoning of both horse-flesh and humanity at times more than once seemed to take visible shape.

"You know Harold Luxmoore, of course?" he remarked at length.

"No; I did as a boy, but he mixes in a d—d supercilious set now, of whom I know nothing," replied Holt sullenly. "I have made overtures twice or thrice."

"But they've been coldly received, eh?" said Mr. Larcher, with a slight chuckle.

"Luxmoore is an insolent prig," returned Berkley fiercely, "and had best look to himself if ever I get the chance to do him a bad turn."

"Most decidedly," thinks Mr. Larcher, "and my dear friend is likely to be at some

pains to put himself in that commanding position. Harold Luxmoore shows commendable prudence in keeping his relative at arm's length."

"It would be, perhaps, to your advantage, Holt, to cultivate more intimate relations with your cousin though, if you could," remarks the attorney, after some slight reflection.

"Perhaps so; but that's neither here nor there. I tell you I can't. The conceited set of brutes among whom he lives turn up their noses at me."

Berkley is hardly warranted in this assertion, insomuch as it was possible, without any conceit, to look somewhat askance at being on intimate terms with such an extremely *mauvais sujet* as himself.

"Hum! then our particular object at present is to prevent his winning either a bride or the Derby. The first will not be easy to interrupt in a man with his income; as for the other, it will very likely

never be necessary to interfere. When it is, there are a good many opportunities, if one only looks about a little. Thank you ; it's all quite clear now, and I'll be off. There's nothing more, I think ?”

“Nothing,” replied Holt with a grin, “except to remember that those whom the gods love die young, and to pray that Harold Luxmoore may be so specially favoured.”

CHAPTER VI.

THE REUNION.

THERE are clubs and clubs, and a very entertaining book might be written upon the colouring of clubs; I mean the different grooves into which these monastic establishments eventually adapt themselves. It has been done, indeed, already to some extent, but the author confined himself to mere sketches, instead of working out his pictures. It is a curious thing how many of these caravanserais eventually settle down into a course of life by no manner of means contemplated by their promoters, and we have heard how the "Hædulus" fell away from the paths of virtue, which its

founders had marked out for it. The "Reunion," originally started as a literary club, had gradually become one of the pleasantest and cosiest clubs in London, but its *habitués* were by no means of the class those who first set it going at all contemplated. The literary element had died out. It often does in the varied societies started by the children of Bohemia. Swelldom creeps in, and gradually, like a parasite, kills down the jest and genial story. The gilded youth of our generation somehow become elect of the establishment; they consider Hogarth coarse, don't know much about Fielding, and require jokes generally explained to them. They are as unfitted to such resorts as that famous lady of quality would be who achieved immortality so lately by her inability to understand that the artist she had engaged to entertain her guests vocally, at the piano, was unable to continue for an hour. "I had a conjuror last year," quoth

my lady meditatively, "who went on for quite that time."

The literary element had quite disappeared from the "Reunion;" but, though the original intention of the institution had been completely subverted, it yet remained a quiet, pleasant, fashionable club—a club with no particular colouring, except that the wrong man didn't often get into the "Reunion." They were a little exclusive in that way, and the slightest suspicion of anything cloudy connected with a candidate's name was sufficient to insure him a perfect hailstorm of black balls. The laxity of the "Hædulus" was no more appreciated than the high stakes in vogue at that establishment.

"Seen Harold Luxmoore in here to-day?" inquired Laceby in his usual languid manner, stopping in front of Herrick, who, ensconced in an easy chair, was perusing Breakspear's notes in the "*Turf Chronicle*," and vainly endeavouring

to discover what that erudite vaticinator intended to predict concerning the City and Suburban.

Breakspear was as ingenious as the Oracle of Delphi, and as difficult to interpret. When you lost your money from following his forebodings, it always appeared afterwards that you had misconstrued his carefully-considered opinion. Given rather to the expression of his conviction that if So-and-so did not win, So-and-so would, with contingent remainders regarding So-and-so's staying, and So-and-so's not breaking down—a style of prophecy in great repute as regards the Stock Exchange, the weather, and the peace of Europe just now ; things about which the Breakspears, who feel it incumbent to prophesy, feel much exercised at present.

“Luxmoore, no,” replied Herrick. “He was in the smoking-room pretty late last night, but I haven't seen him this morning. He's pretty sure, though, to be in shortly.

What do you want him about—anything of importance?”

“No, nothing much—only I’ve made the Laytons send him a dinner ticket for next Thursday, and I want him to go. In his county, you know; and they’re real pleasant, do the thing well, and all that sort of thing, you understand.”

“Muchly. I’ve got a card myself, and am going.”

“Glad to hear it,” replied Jim, with his accustomed economy of pronouns. “Deuced good house, but they want to get acquainted with some good people. The old fellow and the girls are all right, but the Madre has a knack of picking up with what may be termed ‘the outside nobility;’ while the son has a genius for fraternising with all the black sheep about.”

“He has,” returned Herrick. “I’ve noticed him about lately with two or three not likely to do him much good—Berkley Holt, for instance.”

"Ah, yes, I was afraid so; he brought Holt down to Laxton. I should think he'll probably awake to the fact that Holt is rather too expensive a luxury in friends to keep up for long, supposing he at all sustains his character, and one has little reason to presume he will not."

"Here is Harold," replied Cyril Herrick lazily. "As for Dick Layton, I don't think we need trouble our heads much about his future."

"No;" observed the Honble. Jim meditatively. "He is so clearly marked out to be the prey of his fellows that if one interfered he might resent it, and if Holt does not plunder him, some one else, of course, will. How are you, Luxmoore? I was just saying I wanted to see you. Want you to accept a dinner ticket the Laytons have sent you. Nice people, good house, and in your own county; you ought to go."

"I haven't seen it as yet, but I shall be

most happy to make their acquaintance. Are you going?" said Harold, as he dropped into an easy chair.

"Yes; so's Herrick. Meet your flame of last season too, perhaps—Mrs. Richeton. At all events, I found her at Laxby, and she inquired after you with considerable interest," and, as he concluded, Laceby gazed curiously at Harold Luxmoore.

"I'm half afraid I'm engaged," remarked the latter after a slight pause. "What day did you say it was?"

"I didn't say any day," replied the Honble. Jim slowly. "I don't quite recollect; never can without a talk to my fellow."

"It's for Thursday next," chimed in Herrick.

Laceby bestowed a compassionate glance upon the speaker, a look such as he might have cast upon a partner who had revoked at whist, or a man guilty of any other social *gaucherie*. The Honble. Jim had



meant to have investigated this a little more fully.

"Very unlucky; I am engaged that night," said Luxmoore quickly. "Sorry; otherwise I should have been so glad to have made your friends' acquaintance, Jim!"

"Can't be helped," responded Laceby; "but go and see 'em first time you've a chance. The girls really are charming, and I don't want to rail against the sex, but girls are not always in these days. At all events I don't care about them when they bore one about skates, French plays, and Tattersall's, besides manifesting a fancy for cigarettes. Your young lady who honours the smoking-room is a devil of a nuisance."

"But, thank Heaven, tolerably scarce," laughed Herrick, as he rose and nodded farewell.

Looking after him with half-closed eyes, Laceby reflected that Cyril Herrick was

new to fashionable London. "New, yes, deuced new," he muttered. "What a blessing it must be to be a little ignorant of all our social malpractices!" Turning lazily towards Luxmoore, he remarked, "Thursday—of course, I forgot that's the day of Mrs. Florenstein's banquet. No, you wouldn't have met the fair Richeton, Harold; she happens to be going there. By Jove, how lucky Herrick remembered the day; I might have seduced you into accepting under false pretences. Deuced drafty this room; committee thinking it time to lay in the spring colds, I presume."

Harold Luxmoore mused for some little time, and then said, "I didn't know Mrs. Richeton was intimate with Mrs. Florenstein."

"Oh dear, yes, they are sworn allies, those two; always went to Ascot and Goodwood together, till Mrs. Richeton was seized with a fit of morality and eschewed racing altogether. Nobody

knows why ; and if you are a sensible man you will never waste time in pondering over why a woman does or does not do anything ; probably from about the last motive you would have attributed to her. Anyhow, Theodora Richeton, for a couple of years before her husband's death, completely gave up attending races."

"Odd ! You must remember I've been so much abroad, and this gossip is new to me. Florenstein kept horses, didn't he ?"

"Yes ; and Richeton was his partner, but it was all done in the former's name."

"And were the two ladies very much interested in the success of their husband's stud ?"

"Decidedly ; but especially Mrs. Florenstein, who indeed is still. Mrs. Richeton was difficult to understand, but if you ask me, I should say she often simulated an interest she did not feel. She understood it all very well, and was really, for a lady, a surprisingly good judge ; but I fancy she

got so dosed with racing that she felt sick to death of it. You see the fair Theodora is a clever woman, with considerable cultivation of taste, and I can imagine her getting very tired of 'The field I'll bet upon,' and all that."

"You don't think she'll be at the Laytons', then, on Thursday?" remarked Luxmoore, with affected carelessness.

"No, certainly not," replied Jim Laceby; "and you had better change your mind, and dine with them."

"Why should I?" retorted Harold. "I told you I had an engagement."

"Well, break it; I want you to know the Laytons. You don't want to meet Mrs. Richeton. Stop, don't interrupt—of course you never said so—much too polite a man, and all that sort of thing," rather a pet phrase of the Honble.'s, this. "Say I dreamt it was so. I'll undertake you shan't——"

"Very well, I'll come. Never mind

why; but I do not wish to meet Mrs. Richeton."

"I never mind about other people's affairs," replied Laceby, "till they consult me, and then they never mind in the least what I say to them. Of course you don't want to meet Mrs. Richeton, because she dislikes you; that's the delicate way to put it."

Harold smiled faintly as he replied, "Yes, that's near enough."

Laceby drew on his gloves, and with a quiet nod took his departure, musing much as he did so what had taken place between Harold and Theodora Richeton; evidently he thought that the lady, at all events, felt no malice, nor did it seem to him that Luxmoore had aught to allege against her. He was surprised that Harold had known so little of her previous history, as was apparently the case; and yet, upon reflection, he was compelled to own that there was no great peculiarity in that.

Luxmoore, till last season, had mixed very fitfully in London society, and might, therefore, be expected to be tolerably ignorant concerning many people the story of whose lives was, of course, well known to the Honble. Jim. "Fancy he'll turn up at the Laytons' now," he muttered, as he lit his cigar on the steps; "and, if he can get clear of the widow, it will be all for the best. She's not quite the woman to suit him, though I've nothing to say against her. Wonder what has passed between them."

CHAPTER VII.

A DINNER IN GROSVENOR GARDENS.

LUXMOORE jumped into the hansom that was to convey him to the Laytons', and drove airily to Grosvenor Gardens on the Thursday evening. He had received a line from Laceby in the interim, which assured him that he ran no chance of meeting Mrs. Richeton. Whatever might be his reason, there could be no doubt that Harold was decidedly averse to encountering the fair widow; and the Honble. Jim, despite his "never minding about other people's affairs," had been considerably exercised in his own mind concerning that reason. However, Laceby was the last man to worry himself to any great extent

about anything he didn't understand, unless it personally concerned him ; so, after some meditation, which led him to no definite conclusion, he dismissed the subject with a brief " Had a row of some sort, I suppose ; particular row—hardly conclusive on one side, at all events."

He and Harold met in the hall, and proceeded upstairs together, where the Honble. Jim introduced him to his hosts. The party was rather of the *omnium-gatherum* order. Lord Kilfinnon, an Irish peer, endowed with a brogue, good humour, high spirits, and an estate on which the encumbrances pretty well equalled the rent-roll ; two or three warm City men, with their belongings ; Cyril Herrick, and a rather *roué*, doubtful-looking man, who was an intimate of Dick Layton's, completed the gathering ; and a few minutes after their entrance, the Irish peer was escorting the hostess to the dining-room.

Harold found himself in charge of Annie Layton, and was rather struck by his companion's personal appearance. You would hardly have called Annie Layton a pretty girl, at first sight, but you would have been quite ready to swear to it at the end of a couple of hours. If her features were somewhat irregular, the hazel eyes, flashing with fire, and the wealth of her rich brown tresses, made ample amends. But it was not in these lay the girl's chief beauty. It was in her wonderfully mobile, animated face, which reflected every change of her mind, that her great charm consisted; now breaking into ripples of laughter as her mirth was moved, and anon clouding lightly, like a summer's day sky, as her mood became more serious. Quick-witted and high-spirited, Annie Layton was as pleasant a partner as could well fall to a man, either at dinner or dance.

"We have often wished to make your acquaintance, Mr. Luxmoore," she re-

marked, as she spooned her soup. "We like to know all our neighbours, being naturally sociable, but occasionally our neighbours will have none of us on account of our newness. It is very wrong to be so new as we are."

"We were all new, as you phrase it, once," laughed Harold; "and I can't see it is so very criminal."

"No; but there is a prejudice against it," replied the girl archly, "just a little, you'll admit. The county families, the very old ones, you know, entertain misgivings about what we do with our knives, whether we don't use them pretty much as their great-grandfathers did, no doubt. But we wanted to know you, because we have heard so much of you from Mr. Laceby, and he, as you doubtless are aware, is an immense favourite with all of us."

"Jim says you'll all combine to spoil him whenever he goes to Laxton, and always demands how can I expect to keep

him at Liddington with such temptation so near at hand."

"Gracie and I, indeed we all, do our best, I trust, to make Laxton pleasant to our friends," replied Miss Layton; "but, of course, Mr. Luxmoore, there are always some one welcomes more thoroughly than others."

"Just so; those of the innermost sanctuary; those we kill two fatted calfs for instead of one."

"Don't scoff or insinuate such surfeiting of our peculiar intimates with veal," retorted Annie, merrily. "We have plenty of nice people come to Laxton at times, as I hope some of these days you will come and see."

"Miss Layton, don't be rash; having made your acquaintance, who would not wish to improve it. You will be taken at your word; so be cautious."

"I think I must, with a gentleman who pays such prettily-turned compliments,"

replied the girl, with a little mock reverence. "By the way, we had a distant connection of yours at Laxton this winter—a Mr. Holt."

"Yes; he is a sort of cousin. I haven't seen him for years, not since I was a boy, indeed. He quarrelled with my uncle, and was never at Liddington afterwards."

"Then, you don't know much of him?"

"Nothing," replied Harold; "our paths in life have lain wide apart, and I seldom hear of him."

Not quite the truth this, though as near as, under the circumstances, it was possible for Luxmoore to make it. He had heard a good deal of Berkley's career from Laceby and others, quite enough to know that it was very unadvisable to renew acquaintance with him; but he naturally did not wish to say anything against his kinsman, though he might desire to keep him at arm's length.

Miss Layton said no more, but inwardly

reflected that Mr. Luxmoore was endorsing Laceby's opinion concerning Berkley Holt. "Why was Dick always forming such dubious acquaintances?"

"Do you ride, Miss Layton?" asked Harold, after a slight pause.

"Yes; very fond of it. Gracie and myself seldom miss our morning's canter. You, of course, have lots of horses. I know you breed ever so many every year."

"I do," laughed Luxmoore; "but it's a great mistake to suppose that any surety for having anything to ride. I declare, like many another stud-owner, I always seem to have between forty and fifty horses of one sort and another, but nothing to ride. I had quite a business, I assure you, to get a park hack out of the whole lot for this season. Luckily, my trainer sent one back with a message that it was not likely to win a race unless amongst donkeys, and I'm riding that."

Annie Layton opened her eyes wide

with astonishment. She comprehended nothing of the mysteries of the turf, and it seemed to her past understanding that a man who owned as many horses as would mount a troop of cavalry, should find a difficulty in picking out one for his own riding. It is the initiated only who are cognizant of the fact that sires, brood mares, foals, and horses in training, swell to an enormous aggregate without leaving one the owner may bestride. The proprietors of large racing establishments, as a rule, are by no means the best-horsed men in London, for either riding or driving purposes.

“It’s a fact, Miss Layton, I assure you, incredulous as you may look about it ; but, never mind, I have one, and for a wonder she is in her right place. The Ladies’ Mile is the course she was destined for ; and she canters that very pleasantly, as I shall shortly trust to show you.”

“I hope, Mr. Luxmoore, you won’t find

our horses too fast for you," replied Miss Layton, with great gravity; "we think we could beat donkeys, you know."

"As you are strong, be merciful," replied Harold, laughing. "Don't leave me behind, unless I am very disagreeable."

"We will do our best, but I'm afraid."

"You can't possibly canter slow enough, eh?"

"Oh, Mr. Luxmoore," cried the girl, bursting into a peal of laughter, "as if I didn't know your pretty chestnut, with her long, swinging, easy canter! How dare you try to impose upon me so! Why she's one of the nicest horses one sees in the park; but there's mamma drawing her gloves on, which is what nautical people call sailing orders, I believe. You must make my sister's acquaintance when you come upstairs, remember. She admires your mare quite as much as myself, and we both infringe the Tenth Commandment a good deal concerning her."

“Ah!” said Harold, laughing, “the London season, I am afraid, usually gives rise to much violation of that law. One sees so many things one cannot but help covet.” Annie bestowed a bright smile upon him as she rose and rustled out with the other silks and satins to the drawing-room, reflecting, as she ascended the stairs, that Mr. Laceby was right, as he always was, and that his friend Harold Luxmoore was a decidedly agreeable cavalier.

“Well,” said Jim in a low tone as he closed up next his friend, “you’ve had a narrow escape. Deuced lucky for you the ladies vanished when they did. Your confounded moralising is safe to bring you to grief. Take my advice, and drop it.”

“What on earth do you mean?”

“Mean? why, just this, old fellow; breach of the Tenth Commandment, in the London world, is apt to lead to breach of the Seventh, and so the less you expatiate upon it the better. There’s quite enough dis-

cussion upon it, as a rule, without superfluous moralising."

"Don't be a fool, Jim," retorted Harold, smiling.

"Do my best," returned the Honble., "but we can't always help it, you know. Thank Heaven, I'm not clever, and so have to think about my goings on. Your clever people do come croppers, and no mistake. For getting into out-and-out grief, there's nothing like impulsive genius. You can pass that claret if you've quite done with it."

"There you are. Like you I possess that talisman, but I wasn't quite aware of its virtue before."

"Must have been. Pooh! common sense, and nothing else, is like banking on old-fashioned principles. You don't astonish the world either way, but get along comfortably, and without noise. Coffee, by Jove! Hang it, old Layton's getting degenerate! We ought to have

polished off a couple of bottles more of '48 before going upstairs. I'm only half fit."

"Bound to go, though, all the same," whispered Harold. "You can't expect to swallow claret in decent society in the way you do at Liddington."

"Just wait till I'm there again," replied the Honble. Jim. "See if I forget to resent that impertinence."

"The sooner you avenge yourself the better," laughed Luxmoore, as they entered the drawing-room.

In obedience to the hint he had received, Harold at once dropped into a chair by the side of Gracie Layton. He liked what he had seen so far of these neighbours of his much, if neighbours they could be called. In the country they don't reckon miles very closely. We all know that potentate in the Eastern counties by repute, who was wont to gravely enumerate the King of Denmark amongst his neighbours,

and there were certainly nothing like the leagues between Liddington and Laxton that span the North Sea.

"Miss Grace," he said, "your sister tells me that you have both been coveting the one poor riding horse I possess. How fortunate you both covet her, otherwise, after the Spanish fashion, I should have to say, 'Deign to honour me by accepting her;' but it is the old story of safety in numbers."

"Put with great casuistry, Mr. Luxmoore," laughed the girl; "but you talk of your one poor horse. Why, we regard you as a Mazeppa, who has finished his ride, and now possesses horses in herds."

"People always do when a man races; but it is as great a mistake as to suppose that a gentleman who farms ever has butter and eggs enough to supply his house."

"Oh! I can understand that, for I know papa's farm never keeps us going at Lax-

ton, in that respect. Do you ever go to garden parties, Mr. Luxmoore?"

"I go to everything I think will be pleasant, when I have a chance—but why?"

"Because I know mamma hopes to induce you to come to one of ours later on. We've a box sort of villa place at Richmond, where we retreat when the weather gets very hot, and we usually entertain our friends during the strawberry time. It isn't bad fun, for a change, when the Row's getting almost too hot even to sit in."

"Delightful! Look at the rippling water, eat strawberries, and sit on the grass. Only see I'm asked, Miss Grace, and I'm to be counted on."

"What are you two plotting?" inquired Laceby, as he lounged up to their sofa. "Conspiring against somebody's peace of mind?"

"Yes, yours," replied Gracie, laughing. "Meditating dragging you from your beloved Pall Mall, and carrying you off to Richmond."

"No, not yet," replied the Honble. Jim, rather seriously. "Awful jolly, you know, later on, when the east wind's well out, and the strawberries are well in; but there's nothing but colds to be caught on the river at present."

"And pray what else can one expect to catch, I should like to know?" replied the girl with a saucy *moue*.

"Sporting papers say fish; and a wicked old London chaperon, of much experience, told me that she had known husbands caught there in hot weather."

"Mr. Laceby, you are too bad," cried Grace Layton, springing to her feet in much indignation. "I shall talk to you no more to-night."

"Then I shall go," replied Jim, with his habitual coolness. "Always do, you know, when you've nothing more to say; because, as I never have any talk, conversation languishes, and things get flat."

"Incorrigible!" murmured the young

lady, laughing as she crossed over to her sister.

"Come along, Harold—time to be off—lets make our adieux and go."

Their good-nights were soon spoken; and in a few minutes they were strolling up Grosvenor Place, cigar in mouth.

"What do you think of them?" inquired Jim laconically.

"Somewhat vulgar the old lady," said Harold meditatively; "but the two girls are very nice, and pretty girls to boot."

"And will have a pile of dollars each to the back of that. A marrying man might do worse. Ain't a marrying fellow myself, or I should devote my energies to the speculation."

"And in which direction?"

"How do you mean?" inquired the Honble. Jim, pausing to rekindle a refractory cigar.

"Why, which of the girls should you go in for?"

“Both! no, dash it, I don’t mean that exactly—be guided by circumstances, I think—see where my prospects looked brightest, and all that sort of thing. Toss up about it, perhaps; for I’m hung if I know which I like best. But I say, ‘Jordan’s a hard road to travel;’ let’s have a hansom. Here you are, my man—‘Reunion Club’—on you go!”

CHAPTER VIII.

A GARDEN PARTY AT RICHMOND.

THE London season runs on. The Two Thousand is a thing of the past ; and every one knows all about the Derby, now, alas ! too late acquired knowledge for some ; but, turfite or no turfite, that is the race upon which Englishmen will have an opinion, and back it, whether it be thus emphasised on the breezy Epsom Downs, in parched, thirsty Hong-Kong, the plains of Hindostan, or by the blue waters of the Mediterranean. Is not the legend of the plucky Calcutta milliner, who staked her gold mohur in the great Indian lottery, and landed ten thousand and a husband, yet

embalmed in our memories? Ascot with its *toilettes*, its luncheons, and its *crème de la crème* of racing is over. The pigeons are falling fast at Hurlingham, and lawn tennis is in full swing at Prince's. All London, by which is meant that sacred upper ten who are somebodies, and a vast proportion of that less august but still numerous tribe—the nobodies, have thronged Lord's for over two days, to see the struggle between the Universities. Strawberries are in, and at sixpence the pottle; the east wind is hushed, and people lounge in the parks, revelling in summer and sunshine. Mrs. Layton thinks the time has come for those garden parties at Richmond, and that discriminating matron is right. The cool river, the trees with their sleepy shade, the shaven lawn, and strawberries, will be very grateful to those who have been living at high pressure for the last two or three months.

Harold Luxmoore has improved his

acquaintance with the Grosvenor Garden family considerably since that first dinner party. He is now quite an *habitué* of the house, and constantly accompanies the girls in their rides. Cyril Herrick is of opinion that Harold is "meant" for the Matrimonial Stakes, and magnanimously offered to bet Laceby two fifties to one that he was past the altar as a winner before he was past the chair at Epsom in that capacity. The Honble. Jim laughed, and replied that Harold had a genius for flirtation. "Look at the way he carried on with Mrs. Richeton last season, and, by Jove, you know he never goes near her now;" and again, Jim Laceby rather pondered upon how that was; but when Harold confided to him that he thought Mrs. Layton a nice amiable old lady—that vulgarity he once saw, no longer visible to his eyes—the Honble. Jim was a little staggered, and when he further went on to say that Dick Layton, after all, wasn't half a bad fellow,

Lacey put his glass in his eye, stared at him fixedly for a minute or so, and then remarked—

“By Jove, you’ve took it doosid bad, you know. There’s only one chance for you. Have you made up your mind which it is?”

“Don’t talk nonsense, Jim,” replied Harold, somewhat pettishly.

“Ah well, as long as you can’t decide between the sisters you’re safe; but now you’ve got to the length of thinking that flabby-minded young man a good fellow, you’ll be booked for certain about forty-eight hours after you’ve quite determined which it is you are a-gone coon about.”

“Humbug! as if a fellow can’t be intimate with a family without falling in love with the daughters.”

“Don’t matter, as long as he falls in love with the daughters,” replied the Honble. drily; “when it comes to falling in love with *the* daughter, and thinking her cub of

a brother a good fellow, I should say—well, there's something in it. Now, don't get irritable. Why shouldn't you? They're very nice girls. Old Layton is able to do the right thing in the settlement, or, pin-money way, and *you* have heaps of pedigree for both. I don't say do. I never should about marriage. I only say, don't shut your eyes to where you're getting to. You've more experience than I, perhaps, on these matters. I never have been able to fathom how you managed with Theodora Richeton."

"Never mind that; and you'll oblige me by not recurring to it again," retorted Luxmoore stiffly, and he abruptly cut short the conversation by rising and walking away, leaving the Honble. Jim to once more wonder what had taken place between Harold and the fair widow.

It can hardly be supposed that Mrs. Richeton had not noticed Harold Luxmoore's persistent avoidance of her all this

season ; little likely that a woman would fail to note such defalcation in a man with whom it was matter of notoriety she had had some love passages, and many had been her attempts to bring about a meeting with him. But if she was clever in assault, he had proved himself passing clever of fence also, and, though it had not been possible for him altogether to avoid meeting her, yet he had so managed that she had never succeeded in having him at all to herself. She might have said, even in the words of the old song, "We met—t'was in a crowd;" but never did Theodora Richeton succeed in achieving the great object of her desire, a *tête-à-tête* with the lover who had broken her chains. Laceby was quite right when he conjectured that Theodora Richeton was in real earnest love with Harold. She was ; petted, courted, pursued all her married life, she had become reticent, cynical, and scant of belief in man. She knew what her hus-

band had been ; she was too quick not to see what some of these would-be lovers of hers would be likewise, had she listened to them. When Harold Luxmoore, with his frank, honest love, first addressed her, his words of wooing went straight to her heart. She who had been the mate of an intemperate brute, the quarry at which half the *roués* of London had aimed, was it not sweet to her ears to listen to a true love story ! Few guessed this woman's strong, passionate nature, fettered, trammelled by the defensive warfare she was ever engaged in ; she had fallen in love with Luxmoore, as the veriest girl might have done, but she had never suffered him to know it. She had been to him the capricious, unreasonable woman she had been to many others. She had played with him as she had done with many more ; coquetted, been tender, cruel, and varied like an April day. More than once had her passion nearly mastered her, and she had all but thrown herself on

his breast and confessed her love ; but the worldly experience she had gained deterred her. She had seen too much of love lightly won as lightly scorned, and she still trifled with him. She deemed him more fully within her thrall than he was. She had not recognized thoroughly the manliness of his nature. He spoke out hotly and fiercely at last, and told her he'd be no more the sport of her whims and caprices ; she should once for aye decide between him and all others. She hesitated, and nearly gave way to his bold, passionate appeal ; but the old worldly training proved too strong, and she mocked at the love she so feared to lose. She did not believe him when he angrily exclaimed, " Then look upon all as over between us. I'm not a man to be fooled as a woman's caprice may prompt her. I've loved you honestly, and told you so. You answer with jest and equivocation. Good ! I'll spare you further opportunity for exercising your wit.

Adieu!" She swept him a mock curtsy with a smile. Her admirers had flung out of her drawing-room before in this fashion, but she had seldom had much trouble in bringing them back, if so minded; but Harold Luxmoore had never crossed her door-sill since; and Theodora Richeton began now to think that, for once, a man had snapped her chains with one fierce wrench, and alas! the one man of them all she had ever really cared to hold in bondage.

Still, it must not be supposed that Mrs. Richeton despaired of recovering the ground she had lost; but Harold's persistent avoidance of her began to give her considerable uneasiness. If she once accomplished a *tête-à-tête* with him, she thought she could very soon put their relations on the old footing, and had quite made up her mind to trifle with him no more, but this seemed by no means easy to bring about. If it should be deemed curious that, considering

their mutual intimacy with the Laytons, Harold and Mrs. Richeton did not more frequently meet, it must be borne in mind that people are often guests in country houses, who see little of their hosts in the London whirlpool, and the Laytons and Theodora Richeton moved in very divergent sets. True, the widow, in pursuance of her own ends, had paid considerable court to the Laxton people this season, but whether it was due to a hint from Laceby, whether some chance expression of Luxmoore himself had given them their cue, or whether it was due to that instinctive intuitiveness that women always possess on such subjects, the Misses Layton had somehow arrived at the understanding that those two did not harmonise in society. So that when they did feel it incumbent to ask Mrs. Richeton to their house, they usually omitted Luxmoore.

Still, so much as the latter was about with them, whether joining them in their

morning canter, or at *fête*, ball, or flower-show, it was not to be supposed that Harold's intimacy with the Grosvenor Garden family could escape notice. No woman is ever indifferent to what becomes of the love that once was hers. She may care for it no more, but she is curious to the last to know who may be the keeper of the heart she once counted her own. Have we not all noted the keen interest women invariably take in the marriage of a man with whom they have had love passages, slight though they may have been. Mrs. Richeton had eyes, and she saw. Mrs. Richeton had ears, and she heard comment and speculation free upon what was likely to come of Harold's intimacy with the Layton girls. "Nothing," thought the widow in her inmost heart, "if it is within my power to prevent it." But day by day did this intimacy wax closer, and Theodora Richeton saw with dismay that equally did her power to in-

terfere wax fainter. Her hints, her visits in Grosvenor Gardens, were both ingenious and well-timed, but equally unavailing. She could not complain of incivility on the part of the Laytons, for she had been asked to their house on divers festive occasions, but she had only once encountered Harold Luxmoore there ;—that was at a dinner-party. He had then sat at the far end of the table from her, and left without coming up to the drawing-room. It could be hardly termed meeting him. One source of satisfaction only remained to Theodora Richeton ; people, as yet, only coupled his name with the Layton girls, and no one so far had presumed to indicate the special object of his devotion.

“He cannot have been so blind,” she would muse, “as to be ignorant of my own wild passion for him. Oh ! Harold, my darling, when I mocked you most I was nearest throwing myself into your arms, and sobbing out all my love to you.”

A woman's mistake again ! Not one of her sisters who would fail to see this weakness, and not a few men of the world, looking on with that calm analytic view peculiar to their class, who would be cognisant of it likewise ; but a man is very often blind to a woman's love for himself. Theodora Richeton ponders much over this ill-omened passion of hers, quite ready to interfere promptly in her own behalf, so soon as she may see, the possibility of doing so ; a woman likely to make such possibility for herself, and quickly, if once she deem the stake on which her heart is set in danger of being won by another.

But meanwhile it is June, with the nightingales and the swallows. The bloom of the chestnuts is spent, but the strawberries, if not in full bloom, are in full berry, which is infinitely preferable. London has raced and revelled at Ascot, and garden parties down the river are getting much in vogue. A glimpse of the country

becomes sweet, and the jaded Londoner yearns for flowers, grassy slopes, and the rippling of the river. Mrs. Layton's cards are out for her second garden party at Galatea Villa, Richmond, and Harold Luxmoore is pledged to attend that entertainment. Mrs. Richeton, who has lately established a species of amateur espionage over her quondam lover, has no difficulty in ascertaining this fact. She meditates much thereon. She is equal to much *finesse*, and is so much in earnest in this matter that she would stoop to what haughty Theodora Richeton never had yet—the manœuvring for an invitation, but it is impossible. She had been asked to that first garden party, and Harold Luxmoore had not been there.

Galatea Villa was a charming place for such a party; a one-storied building, with dining, morning, and drawing room on the ground floor, and garden and shrubberies running down to the river, on which was

a neat boat-house, properly furnished with skiffs and wherries, eminently adapted for people who meant to idle on the water, whether it were in couplets, quartettes, or even choruses. All these have been known pleasant beneath a summer's moon, albeit the former hath been usually accounted dangerous. I should presume a man in a skiff with a pretty girl by moonlight must either get somewhat sentimental, or be so dead to what the situation requires as to be dubbed an insensate monster. The primmest of maidens would almost expect her hand squeezed upon such an occasion. To have driven a pretty girl home from a snow picnic in the Canadas by moonlight, and to awake not engaged the next morning, shows much fortitude; but studying the stars in a skiff off Richmond in summer time may be pronounced a very fair European equivalent to that temptation.

Now, I don't think till this afternoon

Harold Luxmoore had quite made up his mind as to which of the sisters it was he liked best. When I say that, I mean he had not as yet recognized to himself that he had a preference. That is a thing circumstances very often open our eyes somewhat suddenly to. You, my dear sir, might have philandered for months more with the present wife of your bosom before putting the eventful question, if it had not been for that sudden departure of the family for the Continent, when you suddenly awoke to the fact that without Marianne life would be desolate, and conjured up that terrible picture of foreign counts and barons innumerable, laying their dilapidated chateaux, waxed moustaches, and imperfectly paid revenues at the feet of your charmer. Upon that you spoke with some trepidation and misgiving, and were somewhat surprised to find in the end that it had been only expected you should have come to the point long before.

It is possible that Harold Luxmoore, except for the scene I am about to describe, might have been some time longer in awaking to whom was his real attraction in Grosvenor Gardens, or, to put it more accurately, as to which of the two sisters it was that he had fallen in love with. Harold, so far, had a somewhat indefinite idea that the Layton girls were very nice ; —he liked riding with them, dancing with them, etc. ; but even the two sisters would have been puzzled so far to say that he manifested more liking for one than the other.

The cold collation on the lawn, with the strawberries, and a variety of cooling compounds in the disguise of cups, have been satisfactorily disposed of, and, breaking up in couples or small knots, Mrs. Layton's guests wander about the shrubberies or paddle off in the boats at the bottom of the lawn. Nobody wants to row. Nobody wants to go anywhere—simply to

get out upon the cool rippling river, and bask in all the glories of a real summer's night. Harold Luxmoore and Grace Layton had sauntered down to the water together. They had lingered somewhat behind the remainder of the gay troupe when the adjournment to the river was first proposed. Some people always do linger behind on such occasions, and, as a clear-sighted maiden aunt of the writer once observed, "she believed they did it on purpose." It may be so, but when Harold and Gracie arrived at the boat-house, every one was afloat, and nothing but a skiff left for them.

"Step quietly in, Gra—I mean Miss Gracie," said Harold. "I was in the boats at Eton, and can guarantee you shall come to no harm."

The girl smiled as she stepped lightly into the boat, and replied, "I think I can trust myself to you, Mr. Luxmoore."

"Ah, you've faith in me then. It is

some satisfaction when our friends believe in us untried," said Harold, as with half a dozen strokes of the sculls he sent the skiff well out into the river. "You don't know that I can row?"

"Perhaps not," laughed Gracie, "but I know that you can ride, and I know that you can dance, and I've a general belief in you altogether, so don't feel at all afraid."

"What an evening it is!" said Harold, lazily shipping his sculls. "Should you feel shockingly outraged if I lit a cigar?"

"Dreadfully! but please do, if it is only to see how meekly I can endure such violence to my sensibilities."

"You're very good," replied Harold, as he kindled a cabana. "Do you know," he exclaimed, after a few moments, "it seems almost selfish to indulge in such Hedonism with a companion who can't smoke."

"Do you like a woman to smoke?" asked Gracie dreamily.

"No, certainly not;" and Harold thought

how very pretty his companion looked as she lounged back upon the cushions of the skiff. She had thrown aside her hat, and the red tints in her rich brown tresses glistened in the moonlight, while the delicately-moulded figure, robed in light muslin, was clearly defined against the scarlet furnishings of the boat. She leant her head upon her hand as she gazed musingly into the water, and seemed scarce to heed his reply to her question.

“You shall do as you like about it though, when you come to see me at Liddington in the autumn,” said Harold, with a low laugh. “You know you’re all pledged, and I’ll have a ladies’ smoking-room fitted up, if you and your sister require it.”

“No, sir; Annie and I are not likely to require it. I’ve an idea, too, that ladies who do smoke wouldn’t care much about one for themselves. I fancy they’d consider what did for you would do for them.”

“Don’t be angry; I was only jesting. Of course I know you and Annie do nothing of the kind; but I hope to make Liddington pleasant to you when you come.”

“We are sure of that, Mr. Luxmoore, and look forward immensely to seeing your old house and pictures, and all those famous horses that you have got in the paddocks there,” rejoined the girl softly.

Nothing much in this conversation; very common-place observations so far; but bear in mind the river and the moonlight. Ordinary words become invested with far more than ordinary meaning upon such occasions.

Suddenly, round the turn in the river, comes a big wherry, propelled by four strong rowers, and heralded by blatant and brazen music, with an accompaniment of blatant and brazen laughter. Cockney dom and its young women are abroad upon the waters in force. A French horn

and cornet-à-piston are mutually murdering the "Carnival de Venise," while Cockneydom and its sweethearts—make the night hideous with intimations that they are "magnificent bricks," that "Champagne Charlie is their name," etc. The wherry vacillates a good deal in her course ; the rowers are sturdy watermen ; but whatever may be at the prow, Cockneydom, somewhat the worse for liquor, is at the helm. Ignorance and semi-inebriety steering, small wonder the course of that wherry is zigzagged as that of forked lightning.

Harold contemplates its approach with indolent disgust for a few moments. It seems to him a horrible desecration of the night and the scene.

Suddenly he snatches at his sculls with the muttered ejaculation, "By heavens! the drunken brutes will be aboard of us in a moment." Simultaneously it occurs to these amateur steersmen that they are likely to run into this skiff that is drifting

on the water, and they jerk their rudder lines quickly and wildly in the opposite direction to that which Harold is now pulling. The result is obvious. The wherry's nose swings round, and in another second she crashes into the skiff amidships. Cockneydom, male and female, with screams and perturbations, tumble together in a confused heap in the stern sheets of their boat. The watermen drop their oars, with strong expressions of contempt regarding their temporary masters; and Harold Luxmoore and his charge are struggling in the river!

Harold can swim well, and has a cool head. He is at the surface of the water again in a few seconds, looks anxiously round, and in a dozen strokes or so is by the side of the light dress, which so far has borne the girl up.

"For God's sake keep quiet, Gracie," he cries, as he passes his arm round her. "You're in no danger. We shall be

picked up directly, and I can take care of you."

She makes him no answer. She is indeed too unnerved to speak, but, collecting all her energies, she does her best to remain passive. The watermen are prompt, and thoroughly alive to the exigencies of the situation. One jumps quickly aft, and, pushing his way through the frightened Cockneys, seizes the rudder ropes, two stand by their oars, while the fourth, springing into the bow of the boat, shouts directions to his comrades. It is not five minutes since the collision before the wherry is alongside of Luxmoore, who is devoting himself merely to keeping Gracie and himself afloat. Being a good serviceable broad-bottomed boat, Miss Layton is lifted on board without any very great difficulty, and Harold, with some little assistance, scrambles in after her. Female cockneyhood, somewhat recovering from its fright, and urged by irresistible curiosity,

would fain flock forward and minister to the sufferer, but Harold somewhat decisively rejects such aid, and says somewhat sharply—

“You have run us down by your own confounded ignorance, or carelessness, and all we want is to be put on shore at the lawn there. We shall get dry clothes and all we require at the house. Pull in as quick as you can, men; remember, the lady is wet through.”

“A mighty ’igh and ’aughty sort of feller,” mutters Cockneydom, with bated breath.

“Are you very cold? Sit still; we shall be at home again in a few minutes,” whispers Harold, as he strips the gloves from a pair of little damp hands that he has somehow got within his own. The sole reply is a slight pressure of his own hand as he peels the second glove off.

The wherry makes a clumsy shot at the landing stage, and the watermen would

have fain amended their mistake, but Harold, saying, "Pooh! we are too wet to care now about trifles," jumps over his knees into the water, and calls upon Gracie to trust herself to him. With the aid of the watermen, she puts her foot upon the gunwale, then leaning her hands lightly upon his shoulders, allows him to take her in his arms and carry her up the bank. Her hat has been lost in the scrimmage, and her long wet tresses trail over his shoulder.

"Safe at last, thank God!" he mutters, as he gains the crest of the bank, and looks down into her face.

"Yes, and it is you who have saved me," she whispers, gazing up at him with a faint smile. "Put me down now, please; I'm quite able to walk."

"Are you sure?" he answered, releasing her with some reluctance.

"Yes. Oh dear, what a pickle we're in; at least I am. Look at my poor muslin

clinging round me like a shroud, and if it hadn't have been for your prompt help, Mr. Luxmoore, it might well have been one. I can never forget it. I'm not good at pretty speeches. Will you please remember, if I can't say thank you properly, I know what you have done for me to-night."

"A trifle," replied Harold. "You were in my charge. It was commonplace selfishness. How could I have faced the world again had anything happened to you, and I alive to listen to it? But, nonsense, the wherry would have picked us both up, doubtless; after putting us into the water, the least they could do was to pull us out."

"You don't cheat me out of my gratitude in that fashion, Mr. Luxmoore; but let's run up here to the back door. I don't want to frighten people, nor, to tell the truth, appear before them so bedraggled as I am just now. Ah! this will do. I shall disappear here, and slip up the back

stairs to my room. Don't think badly of me for deserting you," and so saying, Gracie disappeared.

For a few minutes Harold mused considerably over his evening's adventure. Then it came back to his mind that he was wet, aye, so wet as to be actually distilling on the gravel in little rivulets. It was all very well for his companion, who could rush up to her room and re-clothe herself in dry draperies ; but for him there was no such resource. To walk into the town and charter a cab was all he could think of, and without further delay, he struck across from the villa to put that design, and a glass of hot brandy and water, into immediate execution.

CHAPTER IX.

WHAT FOLKS SAID.

As may easily be supposed, the account of Grace Layton's misadventure was promulgated pretty freely before eight and forty hours had elapsed. It was the talk of smoking-room loiterers; it was the gossip of the park. At the "Hædulus" it was asserted Harold Luxmoore had dived for her three times, and that they both would have perished if it had not been for the champion swimmer, who happened to be passing in his barge just then; and here the "Hædulus" diverged into a tremendous controversy, supplemented by considerable wagering, as to who was the champion swimmer, branching off again

into whether he possessed a barge, and, if so, what was a barge; whether a Boynton suit was not as much boat as a champion swimmer was entitled to, etc; winding up with the usual chaotic state the "Hædulus" usually assumed when discussing the rights or wrongs of a subject. Conversation at the "Hædulus" was always flighty, and a promising argument on the Eastern Question had been known to degenerate into a wager of ten pounds as to whether "bluebottle" was spelt with one *t* or two. Late in the evening, spelling, like pronunciation, is wont to become fraught with difficulties, as are remembrances of the songs of our youth and our really excellent stories.

The "Reunion" had again another account, to the effect that Harold Luxmoore had saved Grace Layton's life at the imminent risk of his own, being picked up, indeed, when quite exhausted, and after having been upwards of an hour in the

water. The "Reunion," with much hauteur, remarked further, that as Luxmoore belonged here, they presumed they knew what they were talking about, an argument which was about equivalent to stating that in London you must be correctly informed of what the English are doing in Japan.

In the park, again, they had quite another version. Harold Luxmoore had slipped off the jetty into perfectly shallow water, and that brazen Grace Layton—you recollect the girl? red-headed, green eyes, and a squint, my dear—had given a melodramatic scream, and jumped in after him. Worth jumping after too, I'm told. Has ten thousand a year, and a charming old place in Bloomshire. How he could possibly take up with people like the Laytons, I can't conceive. The father keeps, no I mean kept—I don't want to be scandalous—a shop, and does now, for all I know; but, of course, one doesn't know much about such people.

Old Lady Suntowers this—a sweet, affable old lady, as may be guessed from the above, and who spun out an attenuated jointure by patronising new people to the extent of her ability ; dining with them, staying with them, driving with them, and promising to introduce them to a set who would have seen Lady Suntowers in her coffin sooner than within their gates, and finally abusing them with all the concentrated acidity that three score summers enable a disappointed woman of the London world to achieve. Lady Suntowers, like many more of her kind, had fought hard to be within circles whose doorsteps she had never crossed. Commend me to a woman of that kind for bitterness to those she deems just a step beneath her. Poor, battered, beaten, intriguanter, one cannot like, but one can hardly help feeling some commiseration for these women. At all events, I do, as one does for those who have staked their life,

and feel towards its close that they are about to rise losers from the table.

Not long, one may be sure, before all these rumours reach the ears of Theodora Richeton, ears keen as pretty to hear anything concerning the proceedings of Harold Luxmoore. The widow's brows pucker a little as she digests these reports in the solitude of her boudoir. Adventures of this kind, as she well knows, are wont to lead to somewhat positive results when the recipients know much less of each other than Harold and Grace Layton. "Marriage very apt to come of such an accident," muses Mrs. Richeton; "but marriage shall not be the result in this case, if I have power to stop it." This is no girl, but a vehement impassioned woman, who comprehends thoroughly that her life's happiness depends upon the recovery of that love which she rejected when it laid at her feet. She certainly cannot see her way just now, but she in-

tends watching events narrowly, and availing herself, with exceeding promptitude, of anything that may turn up in her favour. One thing is quite clear, that it is incumbent on her to call at once on the Laytons, and felicitate Miss Gracie upon her fortunate escape. "Quite the proper thing to do," murmurs the fair Theodora; "and one will probably hear the true version of this little shipwreck at the same time."

The family make light of it when she pays her visit. Annie pooh-poohs the idea that her sister was in any sort of danger. "Yes, certainly, Grace and Mr. Luxmoore were run down by a boatload of pleasure-seekers, but they were picked up almost immediately. He, poor fellow! ran the greatest risk, for he would go back to town in his wet clothes; but papa had called, and she was glad to say Mr. Luxmoore was none the worse for it. Yes, of course, Gracie was frightened; who wouldn't be, at finding one's self in the middle of the

river?—but she changed her dress, and even came down and danced afterwards. However, here she comes, and can speak for herself.”

Grace Layton certainly described the thing in considerably more glowing colours. She said no more than the truth when she described Harold as keeping her afloat till help came, but she hesitated not an iota in asserting that he, by so doing, saved her life, and reiterated the statement, with considerable solemnity, when her sister jestingly made light of the danger, and asseverated, “Your dress would have kept you afloat, Gracie, and I heard Mr. Luxmoore say so himself.”

“You might as well assert to the crew of the lifeboat that picks you up that they have no claim on your gratitude, as, if they had not done so, another lifeboat would. No, Harold Luxmoore saved my life, and I frankly acknowledge and thank him for it.”

An amused smile played round Mrs. Richeton's mouth as she listened to this little passage between the sisters. It was a thorough revelation to her; both girls had an inclination towards Harold Luxmoore, and were disposed to listen kindly to love words from his lips. Quite patent to Mrs. Richeton now that Gracie had not only got rather further in feeling, but also deemed herself to have advanced some points in the right of possession. One might suppose, when you save a girl from drowning, she ought to think you have some claim upon her, but I fancy they would be very apt to take the opposite view of it, and, like Grace Layton, consider they had a claim, and sort of right of possession in you. Very clear, this, to Mrs. Richeton's experienced eyes; and equally transparent that Annie was just a wee bit jealous that her sister should have got the better of her in this matter. It does not follow that either girl's feelings

were deeply interested as yet; but we all know that pleasant debatable ground, where, alas! we never can linger long. Immutable law of nature! We must go either forward or backward—become lovers or dwindle into ordinary acquaintance.

When Mrs. Richeton steps into her carriage she is perfectly mistress of the situation. She feels quite sure that, up to that garden party, either of the Layton girls was prepared to fall in love with Harold Luxmoore, let him only give sufficient provocation. She feels assured now that Gracie has done so, and that her sister is not only aware of, but somewhat irritated at, the fact. For a few seconds she debates within herself whether there is any capital to be made out of this *soupçon* of jealousy, but she remembers the loyal love of the sisters for one another, and she decides not. Annie's pure, sisterly affection will soon get the better of that, let her but once be assured

Grace and Harold are mutually attached. You must not think that Theodora Richeton is a thoroughly bad woman, because she is not. When it comes to the winning of a man's love I doubt whether any of the sex are not somewhat unscrupulous. It is their game of war, and it does not do to be too punctilious when campaigning. Here we have a woman in her prime launched upon the first real passion of her life. A woman, too, from the career she has led, cool, subtle, and cunning of fence, having mixed in a school wherein the niceties of honour were a little neglected; accustomed to success, and having good reason to be confident of her own attractions. "No," she mutters to herself, "I'll not submit quietly to having him carried off by that girl whom he has picked out of the water. Ah, me! what a fool I have been. All I would have was there for the plucking last year, and now, perchance, my grapes are beyond my

reach. We shall see. I'd give a good deal to know whether Harold really cares about this girl; but," she continued dreamily, "there is no getting to see him, that is, to see him *tête-à-tête*."

Her Victoria was going quietly up the drive in Hyde Park during these reflections, when her attention was suddenly arrested by a gentleman, who was lounging on the rails, raising his hat. More than one hat had been raised in salutation to her during her progress, and she had acknowledged such courtesies mechanically, almost without recognizing whom they might be from. Why this man should have attracted her attention it was impossible to say. Who can account for why we notice this or that? It sufficeth we do such things, and about as often to our detriment as to our advantage. Mrs. Richeton checked her carriage, and in a second Berkley Holt had slipped through the rails, and was talking gaily and pleasantly by its side.

Berkley was quick at grasping all social chances that fell to him. Some men are not, and lose much ground in the race of life from this want of adaptability and readiness. He had, as we know, speculated somewhat daringly on what might come of his acquaintance with Theodora Riche-ton, and was not at all disposed to consider himself altogether without a chance of sharing the widow's carriage in most legitimate fashion later on. It was something to be seen talking with one of the acknowledged queens of the London world, and no one could be more keenly alive to that advantage than Berkley Holt. He possessed an extensive acquaintance amongst men, but he numbered few ladies of position on his visiting list. Not that he was in the least degree blind to how much women, at times, can do to assist a man's career; but then, Berkley's career had been peculiar, and of that kind to which women can afford small assistance.

It so happened, that even in that, Mrs. Richeton could have been of much use to him ; for in her husband's time she had known a good deal about such matters, and was capable of giving advice that was worth following. She had thrown all such lore behind her, but it is very possible she will take to such studies again. When a woman loves in earnest I could imagine her taking to anything, from Blair's Sermons or entomology to the breeding of game-cocks or race-horses, if she thought it would advance her one step in the object of her desires. Quite likely Theodora Richeton will find it to her purpose to once more frequent Ascot and Newmarket, now that she has lost both her head and heart to a man deeply committed to such pursuits.

She could no more have explained why she had singled out Mr. Holt for the distinction that she had vouchsafed him than her coachman. She was conscious

only that it behoved her to intervene speedily, and to some purpose, if she would not see the prize she coveted carried off by another. Absorbed as she was in her own thoughts, she had some hazy idea that if ever she should need an unscrupulous instrument to her hand, in the prevention of this marriage, she could find none so fitted to her purpose as Berkley Holt. She had no plan, no particular thought, in her head as to what she would do at present. Nay, it was not certain, by any means, that Harold Luxmoore had the slightest intention of asking Grace Layton to be his bride. Yet, her keen woman's instinct told her that he would not ask in vain, and her jealousy made her divine that it was but too likely. She listened with a pre-occupied smile to Berkley's conventional jargon about the day's meet of the Coaching Club, the last night's opera, which he had collected from the morning papers, and such divers small talk as that

gentleman could improvise for the occasion. She'd no more definite idea than that this man might be of use to her in the future. Berkley's audacity awakened her at last.

"Will you be charitable, Mrs. Richeton," he said, "and take me as far as the Corner. It is so terribly hot?"

She recovered herself in an instant then, and with a bow replied, "Unluckily, I am going in the opposite direction. Would you kindly tell the man to drive to Prince's Gate. Good-bye."

Holt raised his hat, and complied with her request, but was far too shrewd not to understand how decided was the refusal. He stood for some seconds musing over this interview, and wondering what it all meant. "Stopping the carriage to speak to me looks well," he muttered; "it's not very often she condescends to do that; but there was no doubt about her No to my proposition to share her drive. Pshaw! I suppose, like a youthful jockey, I'm in too

great a hurry to get home, and made too much running. Naturally she expects to be called upon, and made a considerable fuss about before she yields such privileges as that. Never mind, Berkley, my boy, you are fairly entered for this stake now, and not out of the betting. I wonder what's become of my blessed cousin. He was first favourite last year, and it would be comforting to hear he wasn't trying. Luxmoore would be a dangerous antagonist out of the way." Mr. Holt, upon the whole, feels somewhat satisfied with his prospects, and hints mysteriously at the "Hædulus," in the evening, that he is about to marry a pot of money, an observation which causes old Stephen Billiton, the heaviest punter and bitterest speaker in all that establishment, to remark, "Yes, Berkley my chick, you've been about everywhere with a view to increasing your income in such fashion for some years, but you're not a ladies' man, whatever you may think.

Indeed, there never was a fellow so much about who did so little good for himself as you. Take my advice and stay at home, and concentrate yourself a bit ; it's clear saving that in gloves, etc., any way."

Berkley vouchsafed no reply. He knew it was always a losing game to tilt with old Stephen, more especially when the cards were running against him, as they were just then ; the veteran had plenty of verjuice in his composition, and could not be accused of keeping it to himself. He turned abruptly to join in the talk that was going on in the billiard-room next door, which was fluctuating between red upon green, white your player, and wild speculation upon forthcoming events. One of the speakers attracted his attention by noisily expatiating on the merits of a wonderful foal he had lately seen. "Win the Derby as sure as he's born, you know. Fetch Heaven knows what if he was for sale. They say he's the best-looking one they ever had there."

“How are you, Dick?” exclaimed Holt, as he recognized young Layton in the speaker. “What is the name of this paragon? and where is he bringing up?”

Dick Layton nodded, and replied somewhat stiffly, “Oh, you needn’t laugh. He comes from my country, and you’ll hear plenty about him before you’ve done.”

Mr. Layton had been lecturing oracularly to some young men of his own standing, and by no means fancied an old hand like Berkley cutting into the conversation. He feels that he will be an authority no longer; and when you have been king of the company for a short period, deposition is generally attended with some bitterness of feeling.

“Why, you must be talking of a Liddington Grange foal,” replied Holt, sharply; “that’s the only big stud in Bloomshire.”

“So I was; and they’ve a clinker cantering in the paddocks just now.”

“That is, to your fancy?”

"Yes, to my fancy, and their fancy, and to the fancy of anybody who's a judge," retorted Dick rather angrily.

"As, of course, you are. Why on earth should you snap at me in that fashion? I am naturally anxious to hear about their having a good colt at Liddington. The old man was an uncle of mine, and I always stood the black and crimson hoops in the old days. Of late they'd have broke the Bank of England to follow. They never seem able to turn out a galloper now."

"Well, they've one this time that old Calvert and all the helpers and stable lads are mad about," replied young Layton.

"What do they call it? Has it got a name?"

"Oh, yes—Coriolanus is its name; and they think an everlasting lot of him, I can tell you."

"Very glad indeed to hear my cousin has got something promising at last,"

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replied Holt. "It's time the black and crimson was seen to the fore again."

"Wouldn't like to lay against him to lose a thousand, Holt!" exclaimed a very young member of the group, "would you?"

Berkley turned for a moment. Even he was struck by the innocence of any one who would volunteer to take the odds to that amount from him, and he contemplated the speaker as a hawk that has just dined might eye the robin whom he destines for his future refreshment.

"No, thanks," he replied lazily. "I always back the Liddington horses from old associations. Good-night."

Berkley Holt was not one whit perturbed at hearing that Harold Luxmoore had come into possession of a foal that showed great promise. His turf knowledge told him how many promising yearlings never even saw the famous Surrey race-course. No one better versed in the ups and down of a thoroughbred's career

than he, and he reflected much more over what might accrue to his benefit, through the acquaintance he had established with Mrs. Richeton, than as to what might be the future destiny of Coriolanus. Had he possessed less confidence in himself, he would have been puzzled at the fair widow's taking him up, but Berkley had much too great an opinion of himself not to believe in his own powers of fascination with the other sex. It is no uncommon weakness of humanity, on either side, and it no more entered the schemer's head that he was to be a mere instrument of Mrs. Richeton's machinations, than it had in the first place that Mr. Larcher would be otherwise than subservient to his will. True, he had come to mistrust that shrewd attorney considerably of late, but he owed him moneys that there was no immediate possibility of disbursing, as indeed he would have owed any one else whom it was practicable to induce to advance them,

and yet it had struck him forcibly that to have one's head under Mr. Larcher's belt was a circumstance by no means desirable. He had an indistinct idea that Mr. Larcher would have no manner of compunction upon being hard, to the extent of his ability, upon "poor Berkley" whenever it should suit his convenience, and that he need expect slight mercy or commiseration at his hands.

But life to Berkley Holt was as the recurring changes of the kaleidoscope—brilliancy and gloom alternated with equal rapidity in his career, and, to do him justice, he faced the rapid fluctuations of fortune with unflinching pluck. Had he lived in the days of duelling, he was of that stamp who maintained their position by much readiness with the pistol, and were tolerated of society from the known alacrity with which they were prepared to send any one out of it who should cast a doubt upon their pretensions.

CHAPTER X.

THE LIDDINGTON LOT.

LIDDINGTON should be all alive this bright, crisp, October morning, but country villages and country towns only get "all alive" upon infinite provocation. In good truth, in a pleasant rural village there is not much to be alive left to the eye of a mere lounger. The men are all afield betimes; labourers and farmers are away to their avocations; the women are as yet busied over their household duties; the shopkeepers know there is small hope of traffic at this hour, bright though the sun may shine, crisp though the air may be. The housewives of Liddington, like their

neighbours, who live some two or three miles off, postpone such shopping as they may have in view till well on in the afternoon. Then there is much drinking of tea, gossip and chaffering to be met with in the main roadway—it can scarce be called a street—of the little hamlet.

At this hour—11 a.m.—a few dogs on the prowl, and a few shopkeepers in shirt sleeves on their door-sills, examining the weather with lazy though critical approval, constitute the population of Liddington that seems to be up and about.

Presently, Dr. Slocombe, in his pet Bedford cords and butcher boots (somewhat splashed the latter, by the way), jogs through on a likely-looking hack, and, pulling up at the door of the King's Head, calls lustily for a glass of "bitter."

"What ! you abroad and athirst so early ?" cries buxom Mrs. Hamper, as she appears in answer to his summons, bearing an old-fashioned ale-glass, full of amber-

coloured fluid. "Mercy on us! who's been brought to bed now?"

"Oh, woman," replied the doctor, with a twinkle in his eye; "do you think there is nothing but the relieving your sex of their burthens that may call a man from his bed before the sun has well topped the horizon? And yet, you are right. I have been looking up a nursery, and if the cubs in Jericho Wood don't get on foot the better for the rattling Tom Byers and myself gave them this morning, I can honestly say it's not our fault. We've done our best to open the eyes of the young ones to what a lovely country lies all around them."

"So you've been a cub-hunting," returned Mrs. Hamper. "It's as well John knew nothing about it, or he'd have treated the farm as you've done your patients, and let it alone."

"And it would probably have been equally beneficial. John over-irritates

Mother Nature with his stimulants—bones, sulphuric acids, etc.—pretty much as I do constitutions. Wait till you're ill, Nancy Hamper, and then see what a mess I'll make of you."

The landlady laughed as she replied, with a touch, too, of softness in her voice, "I've been under you once or twice, doctor, and don't want to be again; but if I'd been the Queen of England I couldn't have had more care."

"Pooh, pooh!" retorted the doctor sharply; "interest, Mrs. Hamper—interest. You overdo it still; but when could I ever hope to induce another woman to be as careful of the sugar in her punch-compounding as, after years of argument, I have succeeded in persuading you to be?"

A merry smile flashed across the landlady's face as she took the empty glass back from her guest. "I hear we are to have great doings at the Grange this week. Is that so?"

"Yes, indeed, the young squire has a large party down this time. They arrived in shoals last night. No such profusion of petticoat and furbelow been seen in the old house, Mrs. Hamper, for many a year—not since poor Oliver Luxmoore's short career as a Benedict."

"Ah! we shall have young Mr. Harold choosing a wife ere long, and the sooner the better, say I."

"Of course. I never knew a woman yet who wasn't anxious for more marriages. You all seem to think that men have nothing else to think about."

"It is as well they should think about that first, before they give up their minds to other reflections," retorted Mrs. Hamper. "Oh, doctor, that's the mistake you've made."

"Not at all. I took it seriously into consideration some years back, but a man called John Hamper somehow bested me."

"I daren't stop any longer," cried the

landlady with a jolly laugh. "A man called John Hamper might get uncomfortably jealous if he heard you had been making love to me in the middle of the village at noonday."

"Be precise—be precise," retorted the doctor, picking up his reins. "I only said I meant to have done eighteen years or so ago." Mrs. Hamper turned on her heel with a slight toss of her head, and vouchsafed no reply.

Up in Liddington paddocks this morning, Mr. Calvert is engaged in an operation that he evidently considers of considerable importance. Coriolanus has had a head-stall on him almost from his birth. He has been handled, petted, fed with lumps of sugar; and everything that one of the most experienced stud-grooms alive can think of has been used to give him confidence in man, and to prevent nervousness, as often as anything the real cause of that fatal bane to the race-horse so

constantly called temper. High-bred stock of all kinds, quadruped or bird, is always exceptionally nervous, and requires delicate handling accordingly. That rough treatment has ruined many a colt and puppy, is now universally admitted in every stable or kennel of repute, and seldom, if ever, resorted to. Coriolanus, having been indulged for the last three days in the mastication of a heavy, plain snaffle-bit for the best part of his time, has now been bitted up in earnest. The cavesson is on him, his bridle is bitted up moderately sharp to the dumb jockey, which for the first time is on his back, the lunging-rein is buckled to the check of his bridle, and the son of Velocipede is asked at length to move in compliance with the wish of his ruler—man. His boy is coaxing him to try, for like most untutored animals, he cannot as yet understand what is required of him. Calvert, holding the lunging-rein in one hand and a light horsedealer's whip

in the other, is gently inducing him to pace round in the circle, of which he—Calvert—forms the centre. Pray don't think the whip is allowed to play much part in the lesson; it is kept almost entirely in the background, and only used when his boy's coaxing utterly fails to induce the high-bred son of Veturia to move. Then, noiseless and light as the cast of a crack salmon fisher, the lash falls on Coriolanus's quarters, and that young aristocrat, with a slight start, snorts out suspicion of some indignity passed upon him, resumes his circling a little too impetuously, and has once more to be soothed and petted into gentleness and sobriety.

“ Oh ! by the Lord ! ” suddenly exclaims Mr. Calvert, as his eye is suddenly arrested by the sight of a mixture of shooting jackets and linsey skirts bearing straight down upon him from the house ; “ this will never do. We can't do our lessons in public yet, my man, can we? Our nerve

aren't up to boxes full of ladies so far, by no manner of means. Look sharp, Bob ; off with the dumb jockey. Then unbuckle the lunging rein, and lead him about, and mind he don't get away from you *again*, or there'll be a vacancy for a boy at Liddington Grange, you can bet odds."

The lad was prompt to act and reticent to reply, as a boy in a good racing stable invariably is. Ready obedience and silence are the two first essentials of their education, and no bad foundation either for any one who has to work his way upwards in the world. Coriolanus's small valet, too, believed in his horse to that extent only attained in boyhood, and was conscious of having committed terrible misdemeanour, only the other day, in allowing the colt to twitch this preliminary snaffle-bit from his fingers, and indulge in a wild gallop, though fortunately without detriment to his, the colt's, self—much the most important item of the two in

Calvert's eyes, who would probably have borne the intelligence of the lad's broken arm with more philosophy than the knowledge of a strained sinew on the part of the colt.

"How are you, Calvert? and how are all your *protégés*?" said Harold Luxmoore gaily, as the stud-groom lifted his hat in due homage to the ladies. "I've brought quite a party, who insist on seeing your pets, especially the winner of the Derby that is to be. How many is it that I am to have in for the year after next?"

"I should think there'd be perhaps four, sir. It's not a deal of use entering the fillies unless they show great promise; and one of the colts shows a little weakness in his off hock, that will make it a question as to whether it's not throwing money away to put him in."

"Not Coriolanus?" inquired Luxmoore eagerly.

"No; he's sound as a bell and handsome

as a picture—there he is,” continued Calvert, with some pride, as he pointed to where the son of Veturia was pacing up and down in somewhat fretful fashion.

“How are you, Calvert?” remarked Jim Laceby. “Come to see how the babies are getting on, you know; and, by Jove!” he exclaimed, as he followed the indication of the stud-groom’s hand, “Coriolanus is worth looking at. Quality all over. Can he move at all equal to his appearance?”

“He’s quick as a squirrel round the paddocks, Mr. Laceby, and, excuse me, sir, but I do think he’s too good to stand money against. Beg your pardon, ladies, but don’t go too near him, please. He’s a nervous colt, and he’s not accustomed to petticoats.”

“And is that a horse you think will win the Derby, Mr. Luxmoore?” inquired Grace Layton.

“One we think might if he goes on

well; at all events, the most promising one we've got. Won't you wish him luck?"

"Yes, with all my heart. I sincerely trust he will be successful next year," replied the girl, little thinking how much interested she is destined to be in Coriolanus's success.

"Unfortunately, he won't figure in the Derby till a year later on," returned Harold. "Next time, I regret to say, I have positively nothing in that can be called to have even an outside chance."

The Honble. Jim had been contemplating Coriolanus with the greatest attention for the last few minutes. At last, turning to the stud-groom, he remarked sententially, "You're right, Calvert, it's t'other way on. I shall change my game, and back him. How's the other little beggar?"

"What! Lacedemonian, sir?—that's him, the brown colt the boy is walking about just below."

Laceby and the stud-groom sauntered leisurely towards a slashing big yearling that was pacing soberly up and down some hundred yards away, and the remainder of the party followed suit.

"Good-looking, that one, too," observed the Honble. Jim after a little; "but he don't do after Coriolanus. Weakish hocks, too, Calvert, hasn't he?"

"I'm afraid, sir, we must give him a touch of the irons before he goes to Blithe-down. Now, Mr. Laceby, what do you think of this one? He's the forwardest colt we have, though not the oldest. He's not the good looks of Coriolanus, or the substance of Lacedemonian, but he shows signs of being wonderful fast."

"Strikes me as too flashy, and I don't like a washy chestnut, they've generally a soft point in their character. What do you call him, and how's he bred?"

"Hypocrite, by Beelzebub out of Happy Land. I have doubts about his staying,

but he'll be bad to beat as a two-year-old, on account of his speed, I fancy."

"There, Mr. Luxmoore, wouldn't that make a park hack for you next season," said Annie Layton. "No fear of our leaving you behind then, you know."

Harold laughed as he whispered, "Do you think for a moment I'm allowed to have anything to say to any of these horses till they have been returned from the training stable as useless?—not I."

The sisters opened their eyes wide, as well they might; the turf was a mystery to them past all comprehension.

"This is all very well, Calvert; but where's Beggarman? you forget he's one of the lot I laid against on New Year's Day."

"Of course, sir, of course. He's over here in his paddock. I don't mean to set to work at him for another month, and Darlington ought to keep him till quite the back end next year, I'm sure, before he

asks him to race. He's big, and yet backward."

"Do you like him?" asked Jim abruptly, as Calvert stooped to unlock the door of the paddock.

"Well, I do—and I don't, Mr. Laceby. I shall be real curious to hear what you think about him. He's like a growing girl of fourteen now—all legs, elbows, and hips; but I can't help fancying he will grow into something."

The Honble. Jim and the rest of the party stood for some minutes studying a big angular black colt, who appeared to study them with like solemnity.

"It's a good-tempered one, anyhow," said Laceby at last; "and I tell you what, Harold, if it does well, and goes on growing as it has done, it'll make a devilish good giraffe."

"He's a bad feeder, Mr. Laceby," replied the stud-groom, laughing; "but I hope we shall find he's a race in him some of these days."

"Coriolanus is the pick of the basket, Calvert ; and if it wasn't for his hocks, I should fancy Lacedemonian also, but I doubt his standing training."

"You don't like Hypocrite, then, sir?"

"No, Calvert, I don't; and he carries no money of mine till I've seen him win twice, and seen how he does it."

"Well, good people, you've seen the Liddington Grange Derby lot for the year after next, and now I hope you're all ready for luncheon. Coriolanus and Hypocrite, I really do think, may give a good account of themselves, especially the former."

"Yes, perhaps so ; but I couldn't believe in a horse called Hypocrite," said Grace Layton.

"Oh yes you could, *ma mie*," whispered her sister, smiling, "if his owner told you to."

Gracie replied with a blush and a pout to this somewhat unfair attack, and Annie, having shot her arrow, had no wish to tease her sister further. It had been too

evident of late as to which of the sisters it was that Harold had succumbed, for there to be anything like rivalry between them on the subject, even if it can be fairly said such a thing had ever existed; but there are many sisters, I conceive, who have experienced a slight flutter when an eligible man commenced frequenting the house with evident intention, and who would bear me out in the theory that it has been the simplest accident that has eventually decided him, or rather opened his eyes, to which really was the magnet of attraction.

Harold Luxmoore, indeed, has quite made up his mind on the subject, and determined to ask Grace to be his wife before his party breaks up. Meanwhile, time glides away merrily at the Grange. There are shooting parties by day, which the ladies often enliven by their presence at lunch. The Honble. Jim has darkly hinted once or twice that this entails waste of time, and is detrimental to a good bag;

but his host is so evidently hard hit that he holds it useless to argue the point further, and the remainder of the party seem to find no fault with the liberal allowance of a full hour for that meal, blended with unstinted claret-cup and soothing cigars. Mr. Layton, senior, is enjoying himself enormously. He has lost all the skin off his nose, and if he has not been eminently successful in bringing partridges to hand, he has had the excitement of shooting a keeper in the leggings, fortunately of stoutish box cloth, and then administering a sharp dose of number five to an erring retriever about the hind quarters. As Jim Laceby said, Harold's presence of mind was great in the latter instance; he pretended to believe it intentional, and thanked the old gentleman "for giving that confounded dog a lesson." It is right the parents should get a pull at times, for sons-in-law occasion them much tribulation, as often as not, afterwards.

A particularly good day among the partridges has been followed by a very lively dinner party; for not only are there others of the surrounding neighbours staying in the house, but Harold has supplemented his gathering by a contingent from one or two adjacent houses. The fun has been fast and furious in the drawing-room. Music and divers games have been followed by an impromptu charade, which, from its irrelevancy to the word chosen, and the utter incompetency of the performers to understand what was required of them, had proved a tremendous success. Jim Laceby's impersonation of a Turk, achieved by rigid silence, much stoicism, and intense devotion to a chi-boque, which he had abstracted from the smoking-room, being perhaps the greatest effect of the performance. Nobody seemed to have made out anything about the word more than there was a Turk in it. But that mattered little; it had led to much

laughter, and so far had it served its ends infinitely better than a much more intelligent performance might have done.

Harold and Gracie Layton have strolled away into the conservatory, what time the butler is arranging the tray with sherry, soda, etc., that "loving night-cup" always passed around in well-regulated country mansions. More than one meaning glance follows the young couple from the veteran battalion, for Harold's attentions have been so marked during the week that some of these feel tolerably certain that all is settled, though not as yet announced. They are to some slight extent wrong; but Grace Layton and her family have certainly good cause to suppose that their host will speak to the purpose before long, and Papa Layton is jubilant in the extreme at the prospect. What could he ask better for one of his girls than a good fellow whom she likes, and who possesses the advantages of family and a good estate.

The Luxmoores are of the blue blood of Bloomshire, and that ranks high in Mr. Layton's eyes, had he not that other quality of an excellent income to boot.

"Two days more and you will be gone," remarked Harold, in that intensely prosaic manner so characteristic of the Anglo-Saxon when he trembles on the verge of sentiment.

The lady cast down her eyes and said nothing. She felt that the question virtually settled between them days ago was about to be formally put.

"I know the old house, from what I hear, can't compare with Laxton in comfort; still, I hope you've found your time here go by pleasantly."

"Indeed, I have; indeed, we all have, Mr. Luxmoore, and should he very ungrateful to say otherwise, after all the trouble you have taken to entertain us. Why should you call your dear old home uncomfortable?"

"You are quite right to stand up for it, Gracie ; do you know why ?" Of course she did ; but it was not altogether likely she would give her reasons ; so she did what many another girl has done, became absorbed in the contemplation of her own tiny slippers. "And you haven't been much bored by all the racing talk that has gone on ?"

"Certainly not ; there has been very little, except when we went round the paddocks. I didn't understand it, of course, but I liked looking at the horses. I'm fond of horses, and the young things we saw seemed so tame, and yet so shy, that for the first time I understood how difficult it must be to win a horse's confidence when young."

"Difficult as it is to win a girl's, Gracie. Will you tell me if I have succeeded ?"

She flushed, and faltered for a moment, and then said in low tones, "What is it you would have ?"

"You know, Gracie; will you take the man who picked you out of the Thames, for a husband?"

She looked up in his face for a moment, and her eyes gave consent. She made no resistance as he drew her to him, but whispered, smilingly, "You never would take any credit for that before."

"Holding back my trumps, child," laughed Harold, as he clasped her in his arms and kissed her. "But answer: you promise to be mistress of Liddington Grange?"

"I promise," she replied softly; "and if you care, Harold, to know it, I vowed that night at Richmond to listen to no man's love but yours, till all chance of your whispering it into mine ears was over."

"Was that likely?" he replied.

"I don't know; at all events, I thought so. Annie told me she had heard that you were devoted to Mrs. Richeton."

"Idle rumour, Gracie, though with a

dash of truth in it. I plead guilty to have flirted a good deal with her a year ago, but that is over long since, before even I knew you. Can you not believe me?"

"Aye, and trust you, too, thoroughly. We ought to go back, Harold;" and the girl lingered on her lover's Christian name as woman does when, in the first flush of recognized love, she feels privileged to call him by it.

"Of course. I suppose those good people will be ringing for their carriages. Wait another minute. I shall have my talk out with your father to-morrow. I don't suppose he will object to me as a son-in-law."

"Why, Harold, he thinks no end of you. I should make you vain, sir," continued the girl, "if I told you what pretty things he has said about you and Liddington. Nobody can have had such a happy week here as myself; but papa, I should fancy, comes next."

At this moment fell upon their ears, in melodious though somewhat subdued tones—

“Cherries and plums on the fruit trees are found,
Parsnips is long, and turnips is round ;
My body is hot, and my heart it's a fire on ;
It is just like a mutton chop upon a gridiron.”

The lovers burst out laughing as they recognized one of the Honble. Jim's favourite *morceaux*, and in another second Laceby stood before them.

“Lot of people want to say ‘Good night,’ and don't seem to know how to get away without doing it, Harold, so you'd best go in and bow 'em out, or else we never shall get a cigar. I'll take care of Miss Gracie. I was sent special to see if she'd climbed up a cactus.”

For a moment Harold hesitated ; then murmuring, “All right, Jim,” he vanished to wish his friends God-speed.

“You must be awful glad to see me,” remarked the Honble. Jim drily. “Harold

hasn't much conversation, and he never was good at getting out of an awkward situation."

Gracie blushed brightly, but Laceby was privileged. "He'd a story to tell to-night that has made me very happy. There now, you're to hold your tongue, mind, for a little."

"Accept my heartiest congratulations. You've got one of the best fellows in the world for a husband, Gracie; and now I'm dumb till all is published."

A warm pressure of the arm was Gracie's answer to the first congratulations she had received on her engagement.

CHAPTER XI.

AN OBJECTION.

"You were a very long time in the conservatory to-night, Gracie. What have you got to tell me?" said Annie Layton, when the sisters at length gained the sanctuary of their own bed-room. "The crisis, my dear, has been visibly impending for some days: has it come?"

"Yes," returned the other, as a rosy flush suffused her face. "Will you not congratulate me, Annie?"

"With all my heart, darling. No one could I welcome more heartily as a brother-in-law. We'll have no nonsense between us two; and if I made a wee mistake weeks

ago, my eyes were opened in good time, and, sister mine, I can congratulate you with honest truth now."

"How good you are to me," said Gracie gently. She also had seen there was some inclination towards Harold cropping up in her sister's heart at one time, and in the plenitude of her success, in the first flush of her victory, could but feel some compassion for the sister who had stifled her feelings so loyally and speedily.

"Yes, Gracie, I prophesy you will be very happy. Harold and you will suit exactly, and I think will always be glad to find a room for your maiden sister."

"Maiden sister, indeed! Why maiden, Annie, I'd like to know? Not you, my own. Your husband is about, and I have a faint impression I could name him even now."

"Name him!" returned Miss Layton, with much astonishment. "Good heavens! who is it you mean?"

"Never mind," replied Gracie, laughing. "I'm not going to tell you to-night, nor even hint who it is, but some of these days you will come to me with a love story that will not astonish me."

"Who can you mean?" exclaimed Annie.

"Never mind; but do come to bed. I've my own love affair to attend to just now, and is not one enough for any reasonable woman to manage at a time?"

"I suppose it should be; but I fancy a good many of our London acquaintance would laugh at such a notion."

"Come to bed," retorted Gracie.

"But who is it?" replied Annie. "Gratify my curiosity, and I will."

"I don't know. I won't tell if I do, I vow; so, put out the light."

"I've half a mind to, and strangle you in your sleep afterwards. You shan't sleep till you do tell," cried Annie, laughing as she extinguished the light, and jumped into bed.

Jubilant was Harold next morning, as he sluiced himself in his bath—jubilant still as he donned his neat shooting suit. Had he not won the girl of his heart, and was there likely to be obstacles to his wooing? When with the cerulean ichor in our veins, a rent-roll of ten thousand a year, and the consent of our lady-love, we would fain claim her from the powers that be, at six-and-twenty, there is small danger of refusal, I trow. Harold has determined to have it out with old Layton that morning before shooting, and then, as he argues, there will be nothing on his mind to prevent his doing his duty among the partridges. “They must have seen all the week that I was making play in earnest, and no doubt both papa and mamma will be glad to hear all is satisfactorily settled.”

As he strolled into the breakfast-room he was met by a meaning smile from both the sisters, who had entered just before him.

"Come and sit up at my end," he said gaily, "I shall separate you, and my tea, I know, is always more scientifically constructed than it is at the bottom of the table. Jim is better at the brewing of clever cups than the simple hyson."

"No libel against Mr. Laceby," rejoined Annie Layton. "I'm so glad to hear that Gracie is to make it in future," she continued in a low tone. "You're my brother now, you know, and I shall call you Harold henceforth."

"Wait till the evening," replied Luxmoore, "till I have spoken to your father, and then I shall be only too happy."

"That would have been placed in your button-hole," murmured Gracie softly on the other side, "if you had been up betimes, as you should have been; as it is, I can only drop it on your plate," and, suiting the action to the word, Grace threw a rosebud in front of her lover.

"Very forward, those Layton girls,"

muttered Mrs. Blackden between her teeth, as she witnessed these little confidences. "Upon my word, I never saw such a bare-faced combination between sisters!" Mrs. Blackden had accompanied her jolly husband to Liddington upon this occasion, and had brought with her an angular daughter, just out, whom she considered admirably fitted to be mistress of the Grange, and, under these circumstances, the matrons of England will use harsh language.

But breakfast is over at last, and when Harold quietly asks the old gentleman to come into his room for a few minutes before they start shooting, Mr. Layton is, of course, perfectly aware what is coming, having, indeed, been most properly informed by his wife for some weeks past that this interview was delightfully imminent. No doubt all the guests, and most of the upper servants, could have equally translated such an invitation, had they heard it. The butler and the housekeeper

had discussed this affair for some days, and taken much stock of Gracie in consequence. Housemaids had eyed her, and even the gardener looked critically on her as he presented the choicest peaches for her delectation. Mrs. Blackden alone, with that awful confidence mothers are apt to manifest for their own progeny, was blind to what was going on under her nose, and refused to put faith in the more acute deductions of her spouse. A woman, with a daughter both angular and marriageable, is apt to lose what power of ratiocination she may possess, and it is hardly to be wondered at.

Harold leads the way into that dearly-loved sanctum of all country gentlemen, which usually passes by the name of the study. In it old Oliver Luxmoore had smoked many a cigar, and pored for many an hour over the pages of the *Stud Book*; had meditated much over the new-fangled invention of the breech-loader, and bid fair,

finally, to blow Liddington Grange into infinite space, from the peculiar fancy that seized him for a time of filling his cartridges and smoking his pipe simultaneously. To the last, the old man would load his own cartridges, saying curtly, "he did like to know what he was shooting with, and if you left it to the gunsmiths you never did;" but that gunpowder and ignited tobacco was a dangerous combination he never could be brought to see—like a famous baronet of the shires, not many years ago gone to his rest, who never could be made to understand there was any impropriety in thrusting his lighted cigar into the same pocket as his powder flask when he wanted suddenly to dispose of it at a hot corner. Neither he nor Oliver Luxmoore ever did come to grief, but they are not to be altogether quoted as precedents.

A painting of Plutus hangs across the mantelpiece—the colt that, in Liddington

annals, should have won the Derby. Why he did not nobody can say. There are plenty of such cases; and those who raise the cry of foul play are, as a rule, those least qualified to judge. Those who are thorough racing men do know that a horse, like a human being, is not always the same; that what he did last week he cannot do this; but the noble army of backers never reflect upon this, and raise marvellous shrieks of foul play when the favourite "goes down" to their detriment. In humanity, you admit the potent influence of liver and stomach. Why not in race-horses? Race-horses, poor things, like their owners, are afflicted with stomachs, and bile and gout. Yes, when you see a race-horse is troubled with rheumatism, it is just what we also call rheumatism in the first instance, but concede to be gout a year or two afterwards; for example, Newminster was a gouty horse. But this is terribly irrelevant. We are not writing

upon present racing, only describing, under fictitious names, the history of that famous Derby of a few years ago, whether ten, whether twenty, makes but little difference.

"Please sit down, Mr. Layton. I know you always like a cigar after breakfast, so try one of mine for a change," remarked Harold, as he ushered the Squire of Laxton into his sanctum.

"All right, my boy, all right. My own Partegas are not to be sneezed at, but I'm bound to admit your Cabanas are quite up to the mark, too."

"I dare say, Mr. Layton, you can make a pretty good guess at what it is I wish to speak to you about."

The old gentleman chuckled, as he expelled a cloud of smoke from his lips, and replied, "Perhaps so, perhaps so. I generally see as far through a millstone as my neighbours. I suppose you and Gracie have come to an understanding."

"Will you give her to me? I love her

honestly and truly, and you know I'm in a position to take care of her."

"There's no man I'd sooner welcome as a son-in-law," replied Layton, rising, and clasping his host's hand warmly. "It isn't because you've got money, though I know the value of that as well as any one, but I think you a thorough good fellow, who will make my girl happy. Then, you've a prescriptive right to her in some sort. You always make light of it, but I can't forget that, but for you, we might have lost her, and we should have had sore hearts at Laxby for many a day if our bonnie Grace had been taken from us."

Genial and cheery as the old gentleman always was, yet his voice shook with emotion as he made this speech, and his emotion in some degree communicated itself to Luxmoore, as it flashed across him what would have been his feelings had his chosen bride been gulphed 'neath the glittering river that June evening.

“Thank you,” he said a little unsteadily, as he returned Layton’s hand-grip. “You all give me much more credit than I deserve about that accident, but I presume now we may as well announce it to the world at once.”

“With all my heart,” returned the other with a jolly laugh. “Unless you and Gracie intend to be much more guarded than most young people, the public would very speedily draw such conclusion for themselves.”

“I need only add, then, that whatever the lawyers think just about settlements, I shall be perfectly willing to subscribe to. Let your men and mine talk it over; and what satisfies you will satisfy me.”

“Pooh! we are not likely to differ on that point. My girl won’t come to you empty-handed, Luxmoore. I’ve prospered in life, and as I made my own money, have a right to dispose of it as I like. I can leave Dick a very good income, and

give both my girls a handsome dowry to boot."

"All the better for Gracie," laughed Harold, "she may have that for pin-money; and now I want to see her for ten minutes, and then we'll have at the partridges. If light hearts have anything to say to it, Mr. Layton, we ought both to be very dead on them to-day."

"By Jove! yes," cried the old gentleman, "and yet I'm so pleased," he added, with a knowing wink, "that I shouldn't wonder if I let some of 'em off from overflowing with the milk of human kindness."

"As you like," smiled Harold; "as long as my friends only enjoy themselves, I don't care whether they make big scores or not. Shall we go?"

"Yes; you're just the right age to settle down," Luxmoore, remarked Mr. Layton gaily, as he moved towards the door. "By the way, of course you'll drop the turf now?"

"No, I can't very well, you know," rejoined Harold carelessly.

"Well, perhaps not immediately, but you will get out of it as soon as it is cleverly possible, I presume."

"No, I think not. I am tied to it, remember."

"But, my dear fellow," replied Mr. Layton, turning round on the very threshold of the door, and with a very serious expression coming over his jolly countenance, "You can't surely mean that you are so wedded to it that you cannot give it up."

"Very much wedded to it indeed, Mr. Layton," retorted Harold gaily; "as firmly and as legally as I trust to be shortly to your daughter."

"I don't understand you. Stop a moment, and shut that door, please. We must come to a clear understanding on this point, and the sooner the better. I'm no strait-laced sort of man, Luxmoore, as you

know, but I've seen so much misery wrought by heavy turf speculation, and the maintenance of large studs, that I should have the greatest possible hesitation in entrusting either of my girls' happiness to any one extensively connected with it."

"I cannot help it ; I inherited it, as you know."

"Of course, of course, and while you were unmarried there could be no reason that you should not carry on the stud your uncle left you ; but you must see that it would be better to get quietly out of the whole business now as soon as possible."

"You are not aware, then, of the very peculiar terms of my uncle's will," rejoined Harold in a low voice.

"No ; I never heard anything peculiar about it."

"Very well, then, I'll tell you what it is. I am left Liddington upon the condition I spend six thousand out of the ten thousand a year it is worth, upon the rearing and

running of race horses until I shall win the Derby, when the obligation ceases. If I marry, the property is entailed upon my eldest son, who would succeed unfettered by any such restriction ; but if during my life, without having won the Derby, I fail to expend that sum annually, in accordance with the testator's directions, I forfeit everything but a thousand a year, and the property goes to a gentleman, whom I know you have met—a Mr. Berkley Holt."

"Good God ! what a preposterous and unnatural will !" exclaimed Mr. Layton.

"You see now how I am situated," continued Harold, "and that my retirement from the turf is impossible."

"It's a bad business, a terrible bad business," replied the old gentleman earnestly. "I don't know what is to be done. I've always said no girl of mine should marry a man on the turf ; as for Dick, when I'm gone, he may please himself, but I'll never let a daughter of mine run the chance

of such misery as I've seen come of it once."

"But that is impossible in my case. I only hold the estate on trust till I win the Derby. I cannot alienate an acre. My racing cannot be said to cost me a shilling. I stand in the position of manager of a racing establishment, the expenses of which are paid while I have Liddington Grange, and four thousand a year to keep it up with. Not so rich a son-in-law as, no doubt, you presumed me to be, but still, with what you intend to do for Gracie, I think we shall get on very well."

"May I ask if you ever bet? Pshaw! of course you do. It would, I should imagine, be next door to impossible to run horses and not back them at times."

"Racing can seldom be made to pay without betting," replied Harold sententially

"I am speaking of betting heavily. Four thousand a year, Luxmoore, does

not go far under such circumstances. I speak advisedly. My only sister, whom I dearly loved, I saw killed, slowly, but steadily, by the disgrace and difficulties her husband got into from racing speculations. It all happened years ago, and when I was a struggling man myself; not but what I did something to helping them a bit. He had a rattling good business, which he let go to the dogs from his infatuation for the race-course."

"But I've heard you talk yourself of having a bet upon the Derby," interposed Harold.

"Yes ; but that's a very different thing from being on the turf. Will you give me your word not to really bet, and to retire from the whole thing if ever you are able ?"

"No," returned Harold haughtily, "I'm not going to be treated like a schoolboy at six and twenty, and I certainly decline to be further fettered than I am. My uncle

has tied me to the turf, and I must crave the right to conduct my career there in my own fashion."

Mr. Layton shook his head as he replied, very gravely—"I'm more sorry than I can tell you about this, Luxmoore; but for this one thing, as I said before, there's no man alive I would sooner have given either of my girls to. It will be a disappointment for Gracie, too, I'm afraid. Had I ever heard of the peculiar terms of your inheritance, I should have interfered to prevent your seeing so much of one another; as it is, with the greatest regret, I say it cannot be."

"You don't surely mean that you refuse your consent?" cried Harold; "that you will not give me Gracie?"

"Even so," replied Mr. Layton, sorrowfully, "I could bear better to see her suffer now than to think she ran the chance of being subjected to what her poor aunt was years ago."

"But, my dear sir, this is monstrous. You're as unreasonable as my uncle was in leaving Liddington Grange to me trammelled with such an extraordinary condition. By heavens, I seem to be the sport of fortune, and the football of the two most irreconcilable men that ever existed. You can't mean what you say?"

"I do, and thoroughly," replied Mr. Layton. "I will concede nothing further than if you and Gracie choose to wait and see if the fortune of the race-course will free you from your uncle's most unheard-of condition—I shall be very glad to talk the thing over again with you. In the mean time, I consider there should be no definite engagement between you, and I most deeply regret that, under the circumstances, I must request you to abstain from visiting us—a loss I assure you, Luxmoore, which I shall feel myself extremely."

"Good God!" cried Harold, springing to

his feet, "was ever man on this earth placed in such a dilemma?—an uncle," he continued, pacing the room impetuously, "who leaves me an estate upon condition I win the Derby; the father of the girl I would make my wife insists upon my leaving the turf. My dear sir, do pray reconsider what you have said."

"Impossible. Let us close this interview; it is only painful for both of us. I assure you it pains me very much to have to come to this conclusion. We shall, of course, leave Liddington to-morrow. I little thought that our visit was destined to terminate so sadly."

"Is there no solution to this monstrous problem?" muttered Harold.

"I am afraid not," replied Mr. Layton, rising. "Most sincerely do I trust fortune may speedily favour you. It will at all events be in your power then to decide whether Gracie's hand is worth the sacrifice I ask?"

I don't think either Luxmoore or Mr. Layton distinguished themselves that day amongst the partridges. Harold, indeed, was so distrait as to allow more than one to go away unshot at—a sight so distressing to the Honble. Jim that he couldn't resist whispering—

“‘In the spring, a young man's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of love ;’ but you know it didn't ought, Harold, in the autumn, when partridges are about, and ‘the merry brown hares come leaping,’ etc.”

Harold's curt reply convinced Jim Laceby there was something gone wrong, and the Honble. Jim meditated much whether the course of true love had got into its normal state of trouble, or whether Coriolanus had developed symptoms of equine infirmity. The sudden departure of the whole Layton family next morning to receive, so they said, some relations whose volunteered visit could not be possibly put off, still

further perplexed Laceby ; more especially did he wonder at Miss Gracie's preternaturally solemn face—a face, too, that had been so *riante* and sunny of late. Jim puzzled a good deal over this, but, as Luxmoore did not choose to speak, refrained from inquiry. Concerning the health of Coriolanus, he was by no means so reticent, and at Tattersall's, on the ensuing Monday, Mr. Plyant, the well-known bookmaker, accepted twenty monkeys about the Liddington lot, from a staunch disbeliever in untried yearlings—on commission, as he observed.

CHAPTER XII.

MRS. RICHTON'S CONGRATULATIONS.

WHEN a woman takes an interest in a man in her own station of life she seldom fails to know pretty accurately what he is doing. When she loves she is never in ignorance; pursuing such knowledge, in the latter case, at times very much to her own unhappiness; but it may be confidently asserted of the sex that they *will* know. Astonishing is the information they contrive to obtain on matters that our blundering and less observant selves think far beyond their ken; and how awkward it is when they suddenly confute us with this surreptitiously and curiously-

acquired lore. Victims, all of us, I presume, in our time to woman's insatiable interest in our proceedings.

The party at Liddington Grange had been destined to break up at the end of the week, and the departure of the Laytons a day before their time naturally gave rise to considerable comment. Dear Mrs. Blackden, that amiable lady with the augular daughter, was much exercised on the subject. She could not get over that long absence of Grace and Harold in the conservatory. The *tête-à-tête* between Luxmoore and old Mr. Layton had not escaped her observant eyes. It's well if you can keep clear of such observant eyes when you are under the same roof with them, and she drew, good woman, her deductions ; inimical somewhat to her own designs, but she was a person to look facts in the face with a severity that sometimes almost succeeded in putting facts out of countenance. She arrived at the conclusion that

a proposal had taken place, and that the plebeian brood of adventurers, having landed their victim, had departed in triumph. She confided this solution of the affair with much gusto to other matrons of the party, adding that it had never been her painful experience before to see a man run down by a couple of sisters like a hare at a coursing match. "I wonder," she remarked, in conclusion, "whether they drew lots for him. They looked quite capable of doing so, I'm sure."

Yes; even the brightest and best can expect little mercy at the hands of a bitter-tongued woman, who has marked down a quarry for her daughter, should they come between her and her schemes; and the Layton girls fared no worse than any other sisters in their situation would have done.

Not long, you may be sure, before this rumour reaches the ears of Theodora Richeton. It is well spread abroad now that Harold Luxmoore and Grace Layton

have plighted troth, and there are not wanting those who can quote the settlements he is to make and the dowry he is to get with his bride, to say nothing of when and where the wedding is to be and the honeymoon to be passed. Mrs. Richeton bites her lips as such gossip falls on her ears. She knows now that she loves this man as she never thought to love human being, and he is about to marry another. Fiercely she counts up her own advantages, her beauty, her fortune, her position, her talent. Yes, she is the equal—nay, the superior, of Grace Layton in all these points. “His heart was mine,” she argues, “till that girl’s deceitful eyes stole it from me. Ah, no,” she mutters at last, her lids welling with tears; “it was my own folly, my own mockery, my own coquetry, delivered him into her hand; and then came that lucky accident on the river, which gave her the game. But no, Grace Layton, all is not

over yet ; he loved me well before he ever saw you ; he avoided me all last season ; he gave me no opportunity to test whether his love for me was dead. I'll know that much, at all events, before he stands at the altar with you. I must—I will see him, and alone ; but how ? ” And here Theodora threw herself back in her chair, and bethought herself deeply of how this interview was to be brought about.

It was not easy, but gradually she began to see her way. Her spirits rose as her scheme took more definite shape, and again she vowed fiercely that Harold Luxmoore and Grace Layton should never be man and wife. For days did the passionate and enamoured woman continue to brood over the whole business ; gradually, and by a process of reasoning very common to the human mind, she brought herself to believe that she was the victim of much treachery from her quondam friend Grace. She must have known that Harold was

her (Theodora's) lover; and what right had she to listen to a love-tale from him under such circumstances? Surely, she was justified in any reprisals that laid within her power. Could she but see him, then all might be well; not two years ago—and she knew her very whisper—a glance, the touch of her hand, had made his pulse bound. Impossible she could have lost all influence over him. Had her beauty waned since then? she asked herself again and again; and honestly she told herself it was not so, and the world would freely have endorsed her verdict. Theodora Richeton, in her thirtieth year, was in all the splendour of her charms.

She had hesitated, and she had thought much about this scheme she had in her head. We all of us are a little nervous when we come to risk a Quatre Bras, which may be a Waterloo, but she must risk something. She had determined to write to Harold her congratulations upon his

approaching marriage, and to ask him, for the sake of past times, to call, receive her congratulations, and promise to accord her his friendship in the future. Not an easy letter to write this exactly. Too much sentiment might well make a man situated like Harold cautious about yielding to her request, and yet she thought it was imperative that she should assume the *pose* of a woman who deeply regretted her former coquetry, though, now looking on it, that such regret was quite superfluous to express. Theodora Richeton seated herself at her dainty davenport, and nibbled the top of her pen for some minutes before she dipped it in the ink. At last she dashed boldly into the task she had set herself.

“DEAR MR. LUXMOORE,

“I am told, upon undeniable authority, that you are engaged to pretty Grace Layton, and cannot resist, albeit I have

some old memories to stifle, sending you my sincerest congratulations on the occasion. Time was, my dear Harold, when I had some thoughts that I might some day stand in such relation to you, but, of course all that kind of thing is dead between us long since. Whose fault it was I hardly recollect. Mine, I dare say, though you men change your divinities so rapidly that I am not quite clear upon the subject. However, that is of the past, but our friendship, I trust, is of the future. I don't think you treated me altogether well last season. You never called once. Come and see me when next in town, and, as the children say, 'Make friends again.'"

And here Theodora Richeton dropped her pen, and read her note carefully over. "Yes, that I think will do," she murmured. "Now, how to wind up. I don't think I dare venture any more sentiment. Ah, I have it."

"Don't bear malice, Harold, to a woman

for a moment's petulance, but come and receive my congratulations in person.¹ Tell me I am forgiven, and that we are to be friends in future.

"Most sincerely yours,

"THEODORA RICHTON.

"P.S.—Your intended I have always considered charming."

"And so I have, and do," murmured the widow, as she folded and sealed her epistle, "but I always thought myself more so, and naturally feel disposed to disparage her now." Yet, Mrs. Richton was by no means a woman of such weakness as to undervalue her rival's attractions, and cordially admitted to herself that both the Misses Layton were very pretty and attractive girls, particularly Gracie. Still, let rivalry once ensue between women, and the most honest and cleverest amongst them never quite do each other justice.

This letter found Harold at Liddington

Grange, all alone and dejected. Of course, he had contrived an interview with his *fiancée* before her departure, and explained to her how matters really stood with him. The girl had listened with surprise and dismay to the story of Oliver Luxmoore's will, and her father's somewhat unreasonable decision concerning her marriage, but she had been comforted by Harold's bold assurance that all these difficulties were too absurd not to melt away ere long. "Say you'll only be true, and believe in me, Gracie, for a little, and I feel little fear of overcoming the trifling obstacles that stand between us." What answer could an honest, loving girl, who had given her whole heart to a man, make? She could only say, much as Gracie did, that she believed in him with all her soul, and would wait patiently till he came to claim her. "It's hard, Harold, that we are not to be allowed to see each other," she concluded, "but writing is not interdicted ;

and, remember, I must hear from you pretty constantly—I shall, shall I not?” “Undoubtedly,” had, of course, been his answer; and so, with a warm embrace, had their farewell been spoken.

Very hipped is Harold in the solitude of the Grange. It is sad when the pleasant party breaks up, and we are left “to tread alone the banquet-hall deserted:” and the break up of a cheery country-house party is apt to be fraught with great depression of spirits to the entertainers. When the entertainer is a bachelor, with a love affair running all askew at the same time, it may be guessed with what zest and enjoyment he consumes his evening cigar. When the gods are administering sharp punishment to ourselves, it is wonderful how penitent we become about the stripes we of late have dealt out to our neighbours. Harold Luxmoore, in his present depression and disappointment, reads Mrs. Richeton’s letter with some compunction, such as would

have made the heart of that lady leap with hope, had she but been cognisant of it. He feels that he went a long way with this woman ; that he had wooed her at one time in good earnest ; it was not fair or just to avoid her altogether, as he did last season. By Jove ! he really was fond of her once. He can't stay in this big, ramshackle old house any longer by himself. He must run up to town, and then—well, he will call and make it up with Theodora Richeton. How nicely she writes about his engagement ; and, perhaps, after all, he was a little hard upon her. Softened by his own feelings for Gracie, and suffering under the reaction occasioned by the break up of his party, and the unexpected suspension of his suit, Harold is more tender-hearted than usual. He forgets the merciless coquetry that drove him to break his chains ; he sees only the handsome woman who so delicately begs to be forgiven her treatment of him ; and who

gently hints that she has been quite sufficiently punished in hearing that he is engaged to another. His eyes are shut to the danger he incurs ; he does not see that no woman would ever write such a letter to a man as Theodora Richeton has done to him, unless she believed that her thrall was merely in abeyance—wanting only the seduction of her presence to rivet the yoke once more about her victim's neck—under which belief she is scarce likely to confine herself altogether to congratulations upon his marriage and protestations of future friendship. Harold indites a civil reply to Mrs. Richeton's epistle, which is imperative ; he also says he will call upon her, which is foolishness past all conception.

Five days afterwards Harold Luxmoore is ushered into Mrs. Richeton's drawing-room, with an intimation that its mistress will appear immediately.

He looks round upon the room he once knew so well, and, as a matter of course,

the old memories throng thick upon him. Do they not on all of us when we revisit places in which our hearts once beat so wildly? He recalls the last time he was there, when he pleaded his best and she mocked him. Yes, that is the low chair she sat in, and replied to his earnest words with jibe and jest, looking up into his face, when all his heart was on his lips, with that saucy, *insouciant* smile that had so maddened him of late. The very pattern of the carpet seemed burnt into his brain, and he even recollected those complicated hexagons up and down which he had strode in his wrath. He remembered her *pose*, and the coquettish little nod with which she had returned the haughty obeisance he had made her, as, mastering his rage with great exertion, he had turned upon the door-sill to offer the customary salutation. It was curious that, with the new love filling his whole being, he should have such vivid recollections of

the past; but it is so, nor does it at all follow that there should be any disloyalty to the present in such memories. But the door opens, and Theodora Richeton sweeps into the room with all her old majesty, yet tempered with a slight languor, infinitely more seductive than the pure regal assumption of yore. With a faint smile she shakes hands, and bids her visitor be seated, and then sinks back herself into a low lounging-chair near the fire.

"It is long since you were here, Harold," she says at last in a low, dreamy voice—in those tremulous contralto tones that were wont to thrill through him little more than a year ago.

"Yes," he replied. "I was thinking of the last time I was here but just now. If I was rude, pray forgive me."

"It is I who have to plead for pardon," she interrupted. "Harold Luxmoore, I know I treated you shamefully; but you have been fully avenged. Never mind all

that; it is of the past. I asked you to come and let me congratulate you on the present."

"You are very good," rejoined Harold, his eyes suddenly opened to the awkwardness of the situation.

"She is a sweet, good girl, and not likely to try you—I mean that she would never treat you—that is to say, I've no doubt she will make you very happy," concluded Theodora, somewhat incoherently.

There was a pause of some minutes. In good truth, the gentleman knew not what to say, while the lady seemed too agitated to continue.

"Excuse me," she said, at length, "I am very foolish—we poor women always are. It is hard to shake off old recollections; and we miscalculate our strength sometimes. Give me a minute or two to collect myself. You used to be lenient to my whims and low spirits in days gone by."

"If I could have imagined this interview

could have cost you the slightest pain, believe me, I never should have suggested it," replied Harold, thinking, by magnanimously taking his presence there as of his own seeking, to facilitate his retreat.

"Loyal ever to a woman, Harold, you always were. No ; if I find it hard to bury the past—if I find it difficult to congratulate you on your wedding without some regrets—I'm fain to confess it is all my own doing. If I've trifled my life's happiness away——"

"Hush, Theodora, for Heaven's sake !" interposed Harold quickly ; "you are nervous, hysterical, and don't know what you are saying."

"Yes, you are right," she answered, with a faint smile ; "and last time you were here I was mad, I think, and did not know what I was doing."

He answered never a word. What was he to say ? He had loved this woman passionately once, and felt that tenderness

still for her that must always remain in a genuine man's heart for the woman he has once loved, let her deceive him grossly as she may.

"Yes!" she exclaimed, passionately, and rising from her chair, "Mad! Mad! Whatever you may think, Harold, I never loved you better than that last afternoon you were here. I laughed at your protestations, and flouted you, but I little thought to be taken at my word. I had coquetted with so many, and who ever broke my chains before!" she cried proudly, "if I willed otherwise. I trembled when you came here no more. Ah! if you had returned within a couple of weeks, you would have found a woman whom you had conquered—a woman who no longer dared to trifle with your love. Too late! too late! alas," she murmured, as she pushed the hair back from her temples, and paced the room with passionate steps, even as Luxmoore had paced them some eighteen months before.

Yes, he was avenged, but do not think he in the least gloried in it. He was puzzling only how to escape from so painful a situation. Yet, in that inscrutable way in which trifles mechanically arrest our attention in the midst of the most tumultuous scenes of our lives, he wondered whether she also was impressed with that queer hexagonal pattern of the carpet as he had been.

Suddenly she paused abruptly before Harold.

"You love Grace Layton very dearly?"

He bowed his head in assent.

"And you think she loves you as I could—nay, do—love you?" she demanded passionately.

"For God's sake, Theodora, be reasonable!" he cried, rising quickly from his chair. "It is too late to speak of that now. My troth is plighted to Grace, and she shall be my wife if I can compass it."

"Too late! yes, you are right. Kiss

me, Harold, for once, you never did yet. Kiss me, in token of forgiveness."

He bent his lips towards her cheek, but her mouth met his in a fierce, passionate caress, that might well have made any man's head reel. Then, quickly extricating herself from the half embrace in which he had held her, she leant her arm upon the mantelpiece and drew herself up right royally.

Never had she looked handsomer in her life than as she stood there regarding him—her superb figure shown off to perfection by the close fitting dark silk robe she wore—her whole face still lit up with the passion that she struggled hard to repress. She had meant to have played this game of hers scientifically, but feelings are apt to put calculation out of court, and Theodora Richeton's love was no milk-and-water passion, but—

"Like the lava flood
That boils in *Ætna's* breast of flame!"

She knew what she had done. It was the supreme moment of the battle between them—the last charge of the Old Guard. She had risked all to see whether she yet retained some hold over this quondam lover of hers. Would he ever speak ?

If Harold Luxmoore hesitated a little, it was not that he wavered for an instant ; but he knew that embrace had been a folly on his part ; and yet how was he to have escaped yielding to it ?

“ Our meeting has been a mistake, Theodora,” he said at length. “ Forgive me ; but whatever slight favour you might have once regarded me with, I deemed a thing of the past, or I should not have been here.”

The low steady tones of his voice told her the battle was lost—that this new love, if it had not superseded, had, at all events, given him strength to master, the old. Woman is loth to believe that the love that once was hers is utterly dead ; apt

to fancy that, opportunity being given, it is easy to rekindle it, and that there is much truth in—

“The new wine, the new wine, it tasteth like the old ;
The heart is all athirst again, the drops are all of gold ;
We thought the cup was broken, we thought the tale
 was told ;
But the new wine, the new wine, it tasteth like the
 old.”

Theodora Richeton recognized her defeat with a sickening heart ; but one defeat does not always decide the campaign, and, mastering her emotion with a strong effort, she replied, “I have been very foolish ; it is all over now. You must forget what I have said ; sit down, and tell me when you are to be married,” and Theodora resumed her seat.

He followed her example, but with some uneasiness visible in his manner, which did not escape the quick eyes of his companion.

“Don’t be alarmed,” she said with a faint smile, “the storm is over, and the past is

buried. We are going to chat about the future. In the first place, when are you to be married ? ”

“ Well, I don't know. That's not precisely settled as yet.”

“ I suppose Gracie cannot quite make up her mind to surrender her liberty. Well, it will be your business to persuade her to don the matrimonial fetters.”

“ No, it isn't quite that ; but the fact is, there's a difference between myself and Layton. He is very anxious that I shall retire from the turf, and I am not disposed to comply with his request.”

“ He surely doesn't make that a condition of your marriage ? ” inquired Theodora, with an eagerness, that in spite of all her efforts, she but imperfectly concealed.

For a moment it flashed across Harold that he was, perhaps, making somewhat imprudent confidences ; but, pshaw ! he thought, what can it matter ? The whole story will be public property in a few days,

if it is not so already. "Yes, that," he said, "is how things stand at present."

"Mr. Layton is hardly reasonable. I know something of such matters, and am aware that it is not so easy to retire suddenly."

"At all events," retorted Harold, with a somewhat bitter laugh, "it is impossible for me to give it up at present."

She did not in the least understand his allusion; she merely supposed that he was too deeply engaged in it to be able to withdraw at short notice.

"Never mind; Gracie must wait a little. Things will all come right before long, no doubt."

"It is very good of you to bid me hope," he replied, as he rose to go, and, strange inconsistency of humanity, he felt almost aggrieved that she should say so with so much apparent nonchalance. "I must say good-bye now."

"Good-bye," she said. "Remember,

Harold, we are to be friends in future ;
is it not so ? ”

“ Certainly ; you do me much honour in
making the request.”

“ And you must forget the wild words
I spoke a little while ago. I’m not to be
shunned any longer, recollect. Farewell.”

He pressed her hand slightly as pledge
of their future amity, and disappeared.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE PACT.

THEODORA RICHTON sat lost in meditation for some time after Harold Luxmoore left her. She wavered in her purpose not one whit. She had made her first great attack upon his constancy, and failed, but she by no means regarded that as conclusive. She was thoroughly in earnest, and when a woman so unfettered in her liberty as Mrs. Richeton is that, it is hard to gauge what is beyond her power to bring about. Clinging still fondly to the idea that her love had, as yet, by no means become indifferent to him, she resolutely determined to oust her rival from her place of vantage. He was engaged to

Grace Layton, what matter! Mr. Layton at present refused his consent—that represented time. “A delayed marriage often ends in nothing,” thought Mrs. Richeton. “Two points in my favour—this delay and the fact that I am to retain Harold’s friendship. Now, in the first place, it is essential, I think, that I should know how deep Harold is in racing. He has not many horses running at present, apparently, and, with the exception of old ‘Shooting Star,’ doesn’t seem to have a good horse to his name in the *Calendar*. Not difficult information to acquire,” thinks Mrs. Richeton. She has plenty of racing acquaintance who could put her *au fait* with all this in a very few minutes. She balances for a little as to whether she should refer to Jim Laceby or Berkley Holt in this matter—either could, no doubt, tell her all she wishes to know. Both men know the Laytons also, but the Honble. Jim, it strikes her, is a little

too intimate with the Laxton people, and too decided a friend of Harold's, not to be somewhat guarded about his replies to such questioning as she would fain put him through. No; better she thinks to consult Berkley Holt. He, at all events, is no intimate of Harold's, nor, though she first met him at Laxton, does she believe him to be more than an ordinary acquaintance of the Laytons; moreover, she has heard quite enough of Berkley to know that he is not over scrupulous, and that she thinks might also be useful. When her schemes take definite shape, it is possible that she may need assistance to carry them out.

Mr. Holt is shortly thrown into beatific visions of owning a charming house in Park-lane, carriages, horses, a balance at his bankers, and one of the handsomest women in London as his wife. He lounges back in his chair, and, with all the remarkable sanguineness of his temperament,

arranges his first dinner party ; then he recollects two or three promising young ones he should like to buy : there's a colt by Surplice out of Poverty, called The Felon, that he thinks, could he but lay his hand on it, would prove a troublesome customer for this puffed-up Coriolanus of his cousin's, when they come to meet ; and what fun it would be to run Harold Luxmoore once a year for the Grange estates ! Several other schemes for the diffusion of Mrs. Richeton's income pass rapidly through his brain, for he is carried away with the idea that the little note requesting him, if disengaged, to call on her to-morrow at three, must be due entirely to his own good looks and agreeable manners. Do not think a clever man cannot fall into such mistakes. How the mighty of their time have danced to a girl's pipe, has been the jest of history from the days of Samson and Hercules to those of Nelson, and still more modern heroes.

At the appointed hour, Berkley Holt is shown into Mrs. Richeton's bright drawing-room, and that lady cordially welcomes him, and begs him to be seated.

"You were, no doubt, astonished at such a request from me, Mr. Holt," says Theodora, smiling.

"Astonished—well, perhaps—a little," replied Berkley, vaguely insinuating that he was too general a conqueror to be much surprised at surrender without summons from any citadel. "Still, Mrs. Richeton, it is astonishment of that kind one can submit to with much pleasure."

She smiled slightly in acknowledgment of his compliment, and then continued, "I have sent for you, Mr. Holt, to ask for some information, which I have no doubt it is in your power to afford me."

"I am entirely at your disposal, to the full extent of my knowledge," rejoined Holt.

"I wish to know whether Mr. Luxmoore

is very heavily engaged on the turf; whether his liabilities are large there; whether he bets heavily; in fact, as much of Mr. Luxmoore's turf history as you may be able to disclose."

"Sold—stock, lock, and barrel," murmured Berkley, beneath his breath. "My precious cousin evidently still first favourite, and the widow thinks she's had as much racing as will serve her time. That's the position, I take it."

"Why?" he asked, laconically.

"Because it is my whim, sir," replied Theodora, haughtily.

"Mrs. Richeton must excuse my answering under these circumstances. There are plenty of people, no doubt, who can give her the information she requires, but it would come ill from a cousin of Luxmoore's to furnish intelligence to his detriment."

Theodora's lip curled at this specious reply. She knew right well that there was

no sort of intimacy between the cousins ; that they rarely met and then their interchange of courtesies was of the scantiest. But Theodora Richeton was more than a match for Berkley Holt. Nothing could have exceeded the haughtiness of her reply :—

“ I had no idea you and Harold Luxmoore were such friends. However, perhaps, after all, his friends are the most likely people to get such knowledge from. I will ask Mr. Laceby the question ; meanwhile, I can only apologise for the trouble and inconvenience I’m afraid I must have occasioned you ;” and the widow slightly bent her head as a sign to Mr. Holt that he was dismissed.

But Berkley had no idea of things terminating in this fashion. He felt as the opposing counsel in a promising law suit might do when an undignified compromise is come to, and the fierce glory of litigation timorously laid aside. No ; something

must be got out of this interview; and though the high hopes with which he had entered the house were evidently without foundation, yet it was quite likely that there was something behind this suddenly manifested curiosity of Mrs. Richeton's.

"It must be as you will," replied Berkley, without making the faintest indication of rising from his chair. "I should doubt Laceby being so useful to you as I might have been, had you honoured me with your confidence. I asked 'why?' because if I knew why you wanted to know this, I could answer your question so much more to the point. Of one thing you may rest assured, that no man in England is better informed of the extent or nature of Harold Luxmoore's turf affairs than myself; and that nobody is likely to be so in future, for the best of all possible reasons, that nobody can have half the pecuniary interest concerning them that I have."

"Pecuniary interest concerning Harold

Luxmoore's turf affairs? You—what can you mean?" exclaimed Mrs. Richeton.

"Secret for secret, lady fair. Tell me your motive for wishing to be acquainted with them, and I will tell you mine."

"Let me think, Mr. Holt," replied Theodora, authoritatively, as she threw herself back in her chair. "Yes," she thought, "I must trust him to some extent; and there can be little harm in trusting him with the story of Harold's engagement."

"I will tell you," she said at length. "Mr. Luxmoore is engaged to be married, and his marriage, I hear, is conditional upon his giving up racing. I wish to learn what prospect there might be of his doing so, should he want to, which I understand he does not. In short, how deeply he is committed to it?"

"Odd," he remarked; "and you send to me, of all men in the world, for information. Now, I must ask you two questions in my turn. First, are you aware upon

what conditions Harold Luxmoore succeeded to the Liddington Grange estates ? ”

“ Not in the least, beyond that I have heard it rumoured that his uncle expressed a wish he should continue racing until he won the Derby. What is your second question, Mr. Holt ? ”

“ The name of the lady to whom he is engaged to be married.”

“ That I must decline to tell you, though I dare say you will hear it before many days.”

“ I am not asking from idle curiosity. It's simply somewhat to my interest that he should not marry.”

“ What can it matter to you ? ” rejoined Mrs. Richeton sharply.

“ Will you allow me to put my question in a somewhat different form, and promise not to be offended if it becomes somewhat personal ? ”

Theodora's face flushed, and she replied

bitterly, "If you mean—am I the lady? no, sir; I have not that happiness."

"And am I to understand," continued Berkley, eyeing her keenly, "that you wish to prevent this marriage?"

"I said nothing of the kind," replied Mrs. Richeton, with perfect recovery of her nonchalance.

"Certainly not. I merely meant if you did feel that it would be a mistake on Luxmoore's part, and had best be put an end to, our interests would be identical. Now, Mrs. Richeton, I am willing to give you all the information you require."

"Go on, please; you are already aware of what it is I would know."

"Very good. Then, in the first place, I had better briefly make you acquainted with what Oliver Luxmoore's will really was;" and then Berkley Holt told to Mrs. Richeton that story his cousin had, some fortnight before, narrated to Mr. Layton at Liddington.

She had listened to him most attentively, and, when he finished, remained for some few seconds silent, as if pondering over what she had heard.

"Then, in fact, Mr. Luxmoore cannot retire from the turf without giving up Liddington. The contingency of his winning the Derby is both distant and dubious, as you and I well know."

"Exactly. Do you suppose the friends of the lady he is engaged to are aware of his position in this respect?"

"I can't say, but should suppose so," replied Theodora. "If Mr. Luxmoore is at all in earnest about the matter he would naturally tell the story of his inheritance in answer to the stipulation they would fain force upon him."

"Have you any reason to suppose that his love is strong enough to outbalance his interests? It does now and then with very young men."

"I can offer no conjecture on such a subject," replied Theodora, haughtily.

A more unpalatable question, perhaps, Berkley could hardly have put to her, but in his anxiety to ascertain what his own chances might be in this combination, he was somewhat oblivious of the concerns of his companion, although he had already fathomed the cause of her curiosity about Harold's turf doings.

"Yes, I could hardly expect such a turn as that," continued Holt, musingly. "Luxmoore mayn't be clever, but he would hardly make such an out and out fool of himself as that."

"Your cousin is no fool, sir, as you may find to your cost some day; and I can conceive it very possible that his love for a woman might carry him to lengths not to be comprehended by men of your calibre."

She spoke angrily, though she controlled her voice well. She could not bear to hear her idol traduced by such as Berkley Holt. She despised herself at this very moment; for Theodora Richeton dealt not in subtle-

ties, and knew what would be the outcome of this conference now.

"Fool or no fool, I can't see how I am ever to ascertain that fact to my cost, Mrs. Richeton," replied Berkley, with an easy smile.

"You can't?" she rejoined, with a contemptuous glance. "A child, Mr. Holt, who was acquainted with your energy and determination," and it is impossible to describe the irony with which she accentuated these words, "could predict that you are likely to plot against your cousin, if ever he should look like succeeding in anything inimical to your interests. You would do your best, no doubt," she continued meaningly, "to beat him at Epsom."

Berkley Holt indulged in a low laugh. He was rather tickled at the delicate language in which Theodora couched her allusions. He, who didn't own a race-horse; there was but one way he could

"beat" Harold at Epsom, should he ever look formidable for the great prize of England.

"This marriage, too," continued Theodora, "is against your interests."

"Not more so than any other," replied Berkley, with brutal significance.

Mrs. Richeton's dark eyes positively lightened, as, laying her hand upon the bell, she said proudly, "Shall I ring, Mr. Holt, for the servant to open the door, or not?"

"Ten thousand pardons," rejoined Berkley, who saw he had gone too far. "I forgot; of course we are speaking of this particular marriage. I promise to confine myself to the subject in hand in future."

Quite evident that whatever Mrs. Richeton might have to propose it was to be done right royally, and the conventionalities rigidly observed.

Gently loosing her hand from the bell, Theodora continued, as if utterly oblivious

of the momentary episode—"We have both an interest in preventing the marriage; yours—obvious; mine, we will say—whim, pique; it does not matter what name you choose to give it mentally, providing you keep your lips closed concerning it. Mr. Layton's unreasonable objection, of course, delays it. I think it would be as well that before Mr. Layton's objection can be got over, it should be utterly broken off."

"Certainly. What means do you propose to use?"

"Money and Mr. Holt's ingenuity," replied Theodora calmly.

Berkley's face flushed as he rejoined, "You do me too much honour." He was not dead to all sense of shame; and he could not but contrast the punctilious delicacy Theodora demanded for herself, in contradistinction to the curt bluntness which she used towards him.

But Mrs. Richeton saw in a moment what was running through his mind, and

also that he had too literally interpreted her speech. She had no wish to rend the thin disguise from her confederate, any more than she could endure that the flimsy veil should be torn aside in which she strove to shroud her share in the transaction.

“You misunderstand me, Mr. Holt, I see. What I mean is, that I trust to your exertions to prevent the marriage, but as I am quite aware that delicate operations of this kind require liberal expenditure of money, I was going to undertake the financial part of our little scheme. Excuse me, but the world says you are not rich. Pray allow me to contribute such sums as you may find requisite.”

Berkley Holt knew that he was being bought to do this thing just as assuredly as if it had been so frankly stated, but he was in too urgent want of money to hesitate. He knew the widow was rich, and this would give him a pretext for drawing

pretty freely upon her resources, to say nothing, perhaps, of giving him such a hold over her as might make it impossible for her to say him nay, should he ever think fit to demand her hand. Herein Berkley Holt showed himself somewhat green in judgment; as he might have augured from this very interview that Theodora Richeton was a woman who would disclose all, and face exposure with utter recklessness, should such retribution overtake her. Such women are by no means scarce; in fact, the chronicles scandalous of the day are rife of such histories. To do Berkley justice, he thought of this latter as a somewhat shadowy and far-off contingent that might accrue to him in the course of events—no more.

“Good. Our interests, Mrs. Richeton, then, are in common for the present, and we have determined that this marriage shall not be. As you rightly say, such finessing requires money, and I am a poor man.

You must find the sinews of war. I presume I may count upon the benefit of your counsel at times ? ”

“ Count upon nothing from me, Mr. Holt, but money, and that you shall have freely. I’ll have nothing to do with this business further, and refuse to know anything of it, except in the direst extremity, and then I permit you to call and tell me how matters stand, reserving my right to open my lips even then. In the mean time I think it would be advisable that you should not come here too often, though, of course, I shall be occasionally glad to hear how things are going ; and, as there must be no cheques passing between us, it may be necessary for you to come at times for such money as you may need. Excuse me one moment,” she said, rising, and crossing towards a davenport in the corner of the room.

Mrs. Richeton quietly unlocked one of the drawers with a gold key attached to

her watch, and taking a roll of notes from within, held them out to Holt. "You will find three hundred there. Give me a satisfactory account of your stewardship this day three months, and you will find two hundred more at your disposal."

"I will do my best," replied Berkley with that exhilaration of spirits which the acquirement of ready money invariably produces in adventurers like himself. "Give me but money, and Harold Luxmoore shall never marry, nor win the Derby, till I'm in my coffin," he cried, exultingly. "But one thing more, Mrs. Richeton, the lady's name ; it is imperative, you know, that I should have that."

"Of course ;—Grace Layton," replied Theodora, as she quietly resumed her seat.

"Grace Layton," observed Berkley. "This facilitates matters greatly. I wasn't aware that Luxmoore knew much of the Laytons, though, now I come to think of it, I recollect having seen him riding with

them occasionally in the park. What I mean is this : you see I have an *entree* into that house, which is a pull, and the chances were that Harold's *fiancée* was of a family I had no acquaintance with."

Theodora winced. The jealous, passionate woman could hardly endure to hear the tool she had purchased call Luxmoore by his Christian name, connections though the two were.

"I think, Mrs. Richeton, there is nothing more to be settled between us at present. I shall bear well in mind all you have said. Grace Layton being the young lady, puts trumps into my hand that I never reckoned on, and, though I don't quite see my way just now, I think I can guarantee, if there is to be no meeting between the lovers for the next six months, that their engagement shall be broken off. You could not ascertain that for me, I suppose."

"I dare say I might, but I could not say for certain," replied Theodora.

“Quite unnecessary, quite unnecessary,” rejoined Holt, triumphantly. “Dick Layton is my intimate friend, destined to be particularly intimate henceforth, and there will be very little go on in the Layton *menage* that I shall not be acquainted with from this out.”

“I will give you one bit of advice before we say good-bye, Mr. Holt,” said Theodora, indolently. “I wouldn’t strive to be too intimate with the family if I were you. An acquaintance not unduly pressed, remember, is very difficult to shake off. You have established yourself, but they may hear reports to your detriment if you are not careful.”

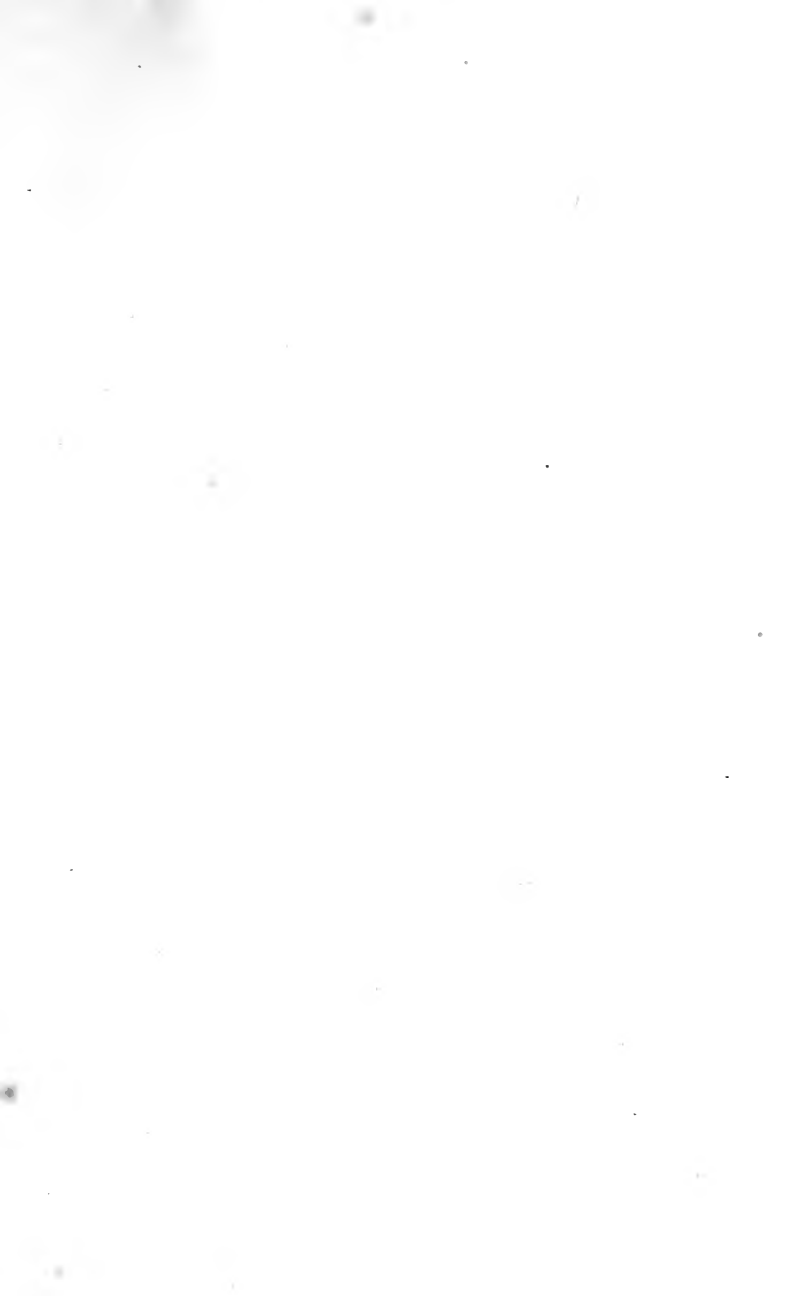
Berkley bit his lips angrily, but was too much a man of the world not to see the drift of Mrs. Richeton’s speech. If he thrust himself overmuch on the Laytons he ran the risk of meeting Laceby and others of Luxmoore’s set, certain to treat him with studied coolness, and the ladies of the

house would be quick to notice such cold shouldering, and were scarce likely to side with him on the occasion.

He made no reply, but seizing his hat bade Mrs. Richeton adieu, with commendable brevity.

As he strode homewards, Berkley reflected, in philosophical spirit, that if he had not found his dreams realized yet, his visit had been eminently profitable, and promised to be still more so. Impossible, he thought, to say how much this little conspiracy might be worth to him in the long run ; and, with a firm determination to work out this new mine of wealth to the uttermost farthing, Berkley summoned a hansom, an expense which he conceived his prospects thoroughly warranted.

END OF VOL. I.







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